



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Matthew 18:21–35

Gospel of Matthew

“The Law of Forgiveness
in the Community of the Forgiven”

TRANSCRIPT

Let’s turn now to the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 18, for the Scripture reading, beginning at verse 21 through verse 35. Verse 21, we read:

“Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.

(Incidentally, this expression in the Greek text probably should be rendered, seventy-seven times, rather than seventy times seven.)

Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents. But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made.

The servant therefore fell down, and (implored him would be [better] than worshiped, as the King James has it), saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. Then the lord of that servant was moved

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with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt. But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellow servants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest. And his fellow servant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee. (the word “all” is not found in the most ancient manuscripts.) And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done. Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, ‘O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow servant, even as I had pity on thee?’ And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the inquisitors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother.”

May God bless this reading of his Word.

The subject for this morning as we continue this exposition of the Gospel of Matthew is “The Law of Forgiveness in the Community of the Forgiven.” What good is it, my brothers, if a man claim to have faith, but have not deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food? If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well. Keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

We recognize these words as the words of the brother of our Lord, James, who has given us an epistle in which he has made famous the statement, “Faith without works is dead.” Guy King, a

well-known Anglican minister who was a Bible teacher in the last generation, and influenced quite a number of people not only by his Bible teaching but also by his books, has written a commentary on James called *A Belief That Behaves*. It beautifully expresses the central theme of the Epistle to James, which is that if we have truly believed in the Lord Jesus, then we should expect to see the indispensable evidence of it in Christian living.

Many people have thought that Paul and James contradict one another. We have heard people say that the Apostle Paul’s statement, “If Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof the glory but not before God,” effectively teaches that works have no relationship to our salvation at all. But then we turn over and read in the book of James that Abraham was justified by works when he offered up Isaac, some have even been inclined to say, well, evidently, Paul and James did not agree. In fact, some contemporary biblical scholars have claimed that, probably, the Apostle Paul was reacting against the teaching of James or vice-versa when they each wrote the statements that they wrote, each thinking that they might clarify the teaching of the Christian church by attacking the other, yet not naming them.

The Reformers taught that a man was justified by faith that works. And it’s in that expression that we have the beautiful harmonization of the two, Paul and James. Paul stresses, rightly, the fact that a man is saved by faith apart from works. But at the same time, James stresses that a faith that does not issue in works is not a genuine faith. And they agree in the fact that we are saved by grace through faith, but that faith is inevitably a faith that works.

We must not think of Paul and James, as someone has said, as two geographers seated on a hilltop quietly mapping out the country, but we should rather think of Paul and James as two Christian soldiers who were fighting a battle. And they fought the battle in the light of the particular enemies that faced them. And in the case of the Apostle Paul, the enemy that faced him was the enemy of legalism—the idea that a man could be justified by the things that he does; in fact, the idea that a man could be justified by keeping the Ten Commandments.

And so the apostle opposes legalism, and points out that any form of self-righteousness is an evidence—that is, if we think that gets us to heaven—an evidence of the fact that we have not understood the grace of God. We are saved by grace through faith, that not of ourselves. It is the gift of God. And so in the opposition to legalism, the apostle stresses that we are not saved by the things that we do.

James, however, was fighting anti-nomianism—the idea that we can believe in Jesus Christ and that belief in Jesus Christ does not have to have any effect in our lives at all. And so he stresses the fact that a man who has true faith will see that faith manifested in good works.

Strictly speaking, they use the same term, works, but they use it in different senses. When Paul speaks of the works that do not justify us, he speaks of the works of the Law of Moses. When James speaks about the works that do justify us, he speaks about the good works that a Christian does—not the works of the law. He refers to Abraham offering up Isaac as an illustration, or Rahab receiving the spies and sending them out another way. So Paul and James do not disagree; they agree that men are saved by a faith that works. Both agree that we are saved through grace, not by anything that we do. Both say that our salvation must issue in works.

The problem begins with lack of understanding, many times, of just what is the kind of work that a Christian must inevitably do in a specific situation. The Apostle Paul states in Ephesians chapter 4 and verse 32 that we ought to be kind, one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ has forgiven us. Now, his words, I think, find illustration in the passage we are looking at, and I think that we should ask ourselves a question right at the beginning: is this what we are doing? As believers who make the profession that we belong to the Lord Jesus and have everlasting life, is our profession visible in our good works?

Now, when I say visible, I do not mean before the eyes of men, because it is certainly true that many who have done magnificent works of faith that were unseen by men have been seen by God. And that’s exactly, I think, what this passage is speaking about that we’re going to look at this morning. John Wesley said, “If this be Christianity (this idea), then where do we Christians live?”

Now the passage begins with a statement that is a natural statement, a natural question raised by the Apostle Peter out of the context of the preceding words concerning discipline in the Christian church. In the 15th verse, the Lord Jesus had said, “Moreover, if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between he and thee alone. If he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.”

And if you’ll remember, last week, we saw that from that verse that it has been stated that when a Christian has been offended by another Christian, that the first thing that he should do is to seek out the Christian—not, get on the telephone—but he should seek out the brother who has offended him in his mind, and settle the matter *unterfebraugen*. That is, “under four eyes;” the two people alone begin involved.

Now, I’m sure that as Peter listened to our Lord, he thought that evidently, if a person were to go to his brother, he is willing to forgive him. He would not go were he not willing to forgive him. And so he recognized in the mutual reconciliation that was to be sought between them, an attitude of forgiveness on the part of the person who had been offended. And so after our Lord has given his words concerning discipline, Peter came to him and said, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?”

In other words, if my brother has offended me, and I am to go to him in a forgiving spirit, how often do I have to do this? And he magnanimously suggested that perhaps he ought to go seven times. Now, the rabbis said it was only necessary to go three. So, you can see that it’s probably true that he expected some praise from the fact that he had said seven, an evidence of Peter’s magnanimous spirit. Shall I do it seven times? We’ll beat the rabbis by four. [Laughter]

Perhaps he even expected our Lord to say, no, Peter, not seven like you would like to have it, but only three is necessary. In which case, he would appear in a very good light.

Now, the Lord’s answer to him is rather surprising. For, when Peter says till seven times, Jesus says, “I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy-seven times.” Now, I don’t think—it seems evident to me—that this is intended to be an absolute limit. He has said “seventy-

seven” times because no one would ever bother to count seventy-seven times; that’s just an expression for limitless number of times. Perhaps the Authorized Version, which has not rendered those words correctly, “Seventy times seven” or 490 has caught the force of it just as much as the seventy-seven. In other words, there is to be no counting. It is limitless forgiveness for the Christian belief in the case of being wronged by a brother.

Now perhaps you don’t need any exhortation along this line, but I do. I can remember many times in the past making this rather insincere remark, “Well, I can forgive, but it’s very difficult for me to forget.” In fact, I have even heard Christians say I can forgive, but I can never forget. That’s very common.

Now, what I think our Lord is saying is that is totally wrong. In fact, I think he is saying the same thing that one of the old Puritans used to say, “Whilst wrongs are remembered, they are not remitted.” We have not really forgiven if we cannot forget, for “the forget” is the sense of the wrong and the sense that we have been wronged. So, these are important and difficult things that our Lord is saying. Until seventy-seven times. In other words, there’s no need to count at all.

This statement, seventy and seven times, is very striking, because in the 4th chapter of the book of Genesis—and I think he must have had this passage in mind—it is stated there that after Cain has sinned and been sentenced by the Lord, that Cain appealed to the Lord or complained and said, “Everyone’s going to be on me from now on, and they’re going to take vengeance upon me, and they’re going to kill me.” And the Lord issued a little statement to the effect that if anyone wrongs Cain, he shall be avenged seven times.

Now, there was the great, great, great, great-grandson of Cain, and he is described in that 4th chapter of Genesis. His name was Lamech. And you can see what has been working in the line of Cain: rebellion against God and willful sin. And finally, Lamech makes the statement, “If Cain is avenged seven times, I with my sword will be avenged seventy and seven times.” And so what we have is the unlimited revenge of primitive man giving place to the unlimited forgiveness of Christian men in the statements of our Lord.

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And it's undoubtedly, it seems to me, in our Lord's mind, that incident there in Genesis 4, and he's trying to stress the fact that the law of the jungle which began with Lamech is over among Christians. It is not unlimited vengeance, but it is unlimited forgiveness for anyone who knows about the unlimited grace of God.

Incidentally, I know that some of you are suffering here this morning. It's a rather warm day. The air conditioning has given us notice that it needs new life, too. [Laughter] It is broken down, and that's why you're suffering a little bit this morning. And I forgive you for it. [More laughter]

Now at this point in the story, the Lord Jesus, to enforce the statement that he has made, tells a little story. It's a beautiful little story. It's a parable, and there are three stages in it. And it begins with the words, “On account of this.” So then he's going to give as an illustration the need for unlimited forgiveness. And it beautifully expresses the attitude of God towards sinners, and it beautifully expresses the debt of sinners toward God.

The three stages may be described as, first, the king and the forgiven debtor. He tells a little story about a king who has lots of servants, and evidently he has some important servants—perhaps tax collectors. He may even have had some men who were so important in his kingdom collecting taxes that they were able to borrow huge sums of money from him. No doubt, this wicked man skimmed quite a bit off the top as well, but in addition to that, he had acquired a debt of 10,000 talents.

The time came for the king to settle accounts with his servants. It was time to pay their bills, and so it was brought before him a string of men who owed him money, and finally a man appeared before him, one of the important men of the kingdom, who owed him 10,000 talents. It's very difficult to tell, in the Bible, the exact monetary equivalents of the coins and units of exchange of ancient times. But, as the best we can do is to say is the talent, which was one of the most precious of all the ancient coins, was worth the equivalent of \$1,000 in our money. That is, a thousand dollars a few years ago; probably eleven hundred now with the rate of inflation that we are suffering under.

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Now, if he owed 10,000 talents, that means that he owed \$10 million. This was a vast sum of money, and of course it's an illustration, and our Lord is trying to stress the fact that this debt that he has is a limitless debt. It's an impossible debt. It's the kind of debt that the ordinary man could never repay. So he stresses the fact that the debt is great: \$10 million.

We cannot read this without making the spiritual application. When he says the slave is in debt to the king to the tune of \$10 million, he's trying to say, in the sense of a biblical illustration, he's trying to say that you and I are limitlessly indebted to our great king in heaven on account of sin. It is very plainly a statement of the fact that we are in complete debt to God, and our debt is so vast, it is insurmountable.

Incidentally, this is Jesus Christ's view of human sin. He views human sin as a debt that we cannot possibly pay. It's too vast. The reason, of course, is that we have sinned against an infinite God, and even the smallest sin against the infinite God is infinite sin. The distinction in the sin against men and the distinction between that kind of sin and sin against God may be illustrated by the sin I may commit against you, and the sin I might commit against President Carter. It would be infinitely greater for me to commit an act of violence against the president than to commit an act of violence against you.

And in the light of the fact that men have sinned against God, our debt is infinite. \$10 million. That meant a limitless debt to them. This is Jesus' Christ's view of sin. We should never think of our Lord who overlooks the guilt of men. He faces it squarely.

Now, in addition, we read that when the man appeared before the king, he had nothing to pay. He not only had a limitless debt—a vast sum of money—but he had nothing with which to pay. And yet, he owed talents. And do you know that if he worked for 1,000 weeks at the rate of pay that was given a worker in those days, if worked for 1,000 weeks—20 years. (Is that 20? More than that, isn't it?) He would pay one talent back. He had nothing with which to pay.

The Bible tells us that when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. Without strength, without anything to pay—that's our status before God.

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Now, when the man sees that he has nothing, and he has this vast sum, and the time has come to pay the debts, he falls down before the king and implores him, lord, have patience with me like all debtors do. If there are bankers in the audience, I know you could give countless illustrations of “it’s true, I don’t have any money to pay, but if you just give me a little time, I’ll pay it all.”

Now, this incident illustrates, of course, how true to life our Lord’s illustrations were. Just give me a little time, and I’ll pay the whole thing. Later on, the king calls it, “All that debt.” You know, we don’t really realize how large our debt is until we look at our debt in the light of the Word of God. It’s just as if we were sitting in a room in which the air appears to be clear and clean; it smells fresh. And suddenly a shaft of light from the window comes in, and we’re sitting over so we can see the rays of the sun, and then we see, floating about, in that so-called pure air of the room, dust, lint, and all of the other kind of particles that you and I breathe over and over again. Fortunately, there are no shafts of light coming in this room now, because you would think that the whole atmosphere is polluted.

It’s when the shaft of the light of the Holy Spirit in the Word of God shines into the light of men, and he realizes his status before God. But he should assume the position of this servant and fall down before our great king and implore him, O God, give forgiveness.

Now, the king is not an ordinary kind of person. This man had asked for respite. He had asked for time. He had asked for patience. But instead, he received the remission of his debt, totally. Immediately. It reminds me of the statements of the Psalms, in which we have reference made to the innumerable evils that have encompassed my head about, so the Psalmist said. He says, “My iniquities are more than the hairs of my head”—now, that’s not an effective illustration with me, I know [laughter], but if some of you young people were up here it still would pertain to you, too. “My iniquities are more than the hairs of my head,” and in that same Psalm the Psalmist says, “Thy thoughts to me are innumerable.” Thy thoughts to me and Thy grace toward me, they are innumerable, and so the innumerable, gracious activities of God toward me are such as to cover all of my sins which cannot be measured. So he forgave him that debt.

Now what would you expect a man who had such great compassion shown to him to do? Well, this man is so typical of many who have heard about the forgiveness that is preached through the Lord Jesus Christ, for remember, the apostles were told that they were to go forth from Jerusalem to the four corners of the earth preaching repentance and forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ. So what does he do?

Well here we have the second stage. We have the forgiven debtor who suddenly becomes an unforgiving debtor. We read that he dried his tears, he went out, and who should he chance upon but someone who owed him a debt. And he owed him 100 denarii, which in our money would be equivalent to about \$20. That's all.

So he grabs this unfortunately person who owes him \$20 by the throat. The Greek text says he began to choke him. And he said, pay me what you owe me! And amidst the complaining, and amidst the imploring of this poor wretch, who owed him \$20, he took him all the way to the slammer. [Laughter] That's what it says here in the Greek text [more laughter].

Incidentally, when it says down here, in verse 30, “When the fellow servant fell down at his feet and besought him saying, have patience with me and I will pay thee,” it says, “And he would not,” and that's in the imperfect tense in Greek which means that he kept saying this. So, evidently this wretch kept saying, have patience with me and I'll pay you! And he said, no! Have patience with me, I'll pay you, he said as he dragged him all the way to the jail. And over and over this conversation persisted, and over and over he was utterly unmoved by the appeals of the wretch.

And what's so striking about this, which shows you how wicked a man's heart can be, why the man who is appealing to him because he owes him \$20 and is asking for patience and saying he would pay, is using the identical expressions that this wretch has used with the king. And they do arouse any remembrance in his own mind of the mercy and grace that had been shown him. No picture could be worse of the sin and guilt of an individual who has heard forgiveness preached, but who has never really let that enter into the soul and spirit of his being.

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And so, word then comes to the king. This man is going to have his pound of flesh, but when he has his pound of flesh, he discovers that what he thought he had, he doesn't really have, because it had never entered into his spirit, as I say. So word came from the fellow servants who saw what was done and recognized the injustice of it, and they appealed to the king and said, why, the wretch that you forgave \$10 million would not forgive his fellow servant \$20 worth of debt.

And so his lord, then, after he had called him, said, “O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt,”—isn't that a lovely expression, “all that debt?” What a beautiful expression of how much we owe, each one of us. All that debt. So here we have the king and unforgiving debtor. And the unforgiving debtor becomes an unforgiven debtor. “I forgave thee all that debt; shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow servant, even as I had pity on thee?” Now notice, he says he's a wicked servant, now. Before, he had just been a servant. Now he's a wicked servant. He had been a debtor before, now he's a wicked debtor.

Now, Peter had asked, Lord, how often do I have to forgive? Here's Peter's answer, right here in verse 31, “Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow servant, even as I had pity on thee?” Peter, the answer is you forgive your Christian brethren just as I have forgiven you. Is that seven times? Is that seventy-seven times? Is that 490 times? No, my dear Christian friend, we have been forgiven limitless, infinite debt, and the responsibility rests upon Christians in the light of their limitless, forgiven debt to forgive their Christian brethren those little \$20 worth of offenses that have been committed against us, many of which are not really against us but caused by us, too. That's Peter's answer.

Now, of course, this truth is a truth that is not simply taught here. In fact, you might wonder about my interpretation if it were only found here. But this is part and parcel of the whole of the New Testament. The Apostle John, who undoubtedly thought a great deal over these incidences of our Lord's life, and then many years later wrote his epistle, wrote in verse 14 of 1 John chapter 3, “We know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren. He who loveth not his brother abideth in death.”

We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our Christian brethren. This is the indispensable evidence of having received the forgiveness of sins. And if we do not love our Christian brethren, John says, then we abide in death. Those are sharp words, but they are words from an authoritative apostle. And then in the 4th chapter and the 19th verse he says, “We love him because he first loved us. If a man say, ‘I love God’ and hate his brother, he is a liar.” I can forgive but I cannot forget. That’s a lie. “He that loveth not his brother who he hath seen, how can he loveth God who he has not seen?”

You see, what our Lord is teaching is, essentially, the perseverance of the saints. He’s saying that those who have received the knowledge of the forgiveness of sins and the new life that God implants within them through the saving work of the Lord Jesus, he’s saying that those who have looked off to the objective, atoning work of the Lord Jesus upon the cross, and have seen that that objective, atoning work when he cried out, “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” when he has seen that fact and has realized that the Lord Jesus died for sinners, and that he is a sinner, he has realized infinite forgiveness of sins. He’s saying when a man has seen that, and has truly seen it, he must forgive his brethren their little debts.

How insignificant is the little wrong that is done me in the light of the great wrong that I have done God, which has been forgiven. How unworthy of the new life can a man be who has been forgiven infinite debt, who cannot forgive a little debt that some Christian brother or sister may have contracted against me on some little thing that they have said or done that has offended my spirit.

You know, it says here, “He was moved with wrath.” In the earlier part of the incident, he was moved with compassion. This illustrates, of course, the two sides of our Lord’s nature. He is moved with compassion to forgive the sins of sinners, but he is moved with divine wrath when that forgiveness does not take. It had not taken with this man. He had heard words of forgiveness, but they had never become his.

Just as I have preached that there is forgiveness of sins for sinners, and you have heard these words, but they may never have taken. You do not have new life. You do not have the forgiveness of

sins. The inevitable consequence of the reception of it is that we love the brethren, because we have been loved infinitely. These are hard words, but they are divine words. We forgive because we are forgiven. If we do not forgive, we have not been forgiven.

Now, there is a pointed application at the end. These are the words of the Lord Jesus. They are hard words, but they are very true. “So likewise,” he says, “Shall my heavenly Father do also unto you,”—cast you to the tormentors until you pay everything that is due. And since you can never do it, that means infinite, eternal punishment. “So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts”—that was his problem; he had received the announcement of the forgiveness of sins, but it had never become his own—“forgive not every one his brother.” Forgiveness *ex corde*—forgiveness from the heart.

Now, let me assure you, I do believe in salvation by grace through faith. I believe that when a man sees that objective work of Christ, and realizes that that is sufficient for his sins for time and eternity, and before the Lord says, “O God, I thank Thee that Thou has given Christ to die for sinners; I am a sinner; I receive as a free gift the gift of salvation”—that person becomes a child of God.

He is given by God a new nature, a new life. He is given a resurrection life. Salvation is by grace through faith, but the man who has received salvation by grace through faith will inevitably manifest that in good works—love for the brethren, as this text suggests it. It’s a high ideal, but nevertheless it’s a true word from God.

John Owen put it, and I think put it very beautifully, “Our forgiving another will not procure forgiveness for ourselves, but our not forgiving others proves that we ourselves are not forgiven.”

So I ask you this morning. You know about the forgiveness of sins through the saving work of Christ, but do you have it? You know that he came to die for sinners, but do you know that you’re a sinner and that he’s died for you? Is that your experience? Have you come through the act of faith to the knowledge that Christ is my Savior?

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You see, he’s presented in two different aspects here. He’s presented as the Savior. He’s also presented as the judge. He is presented here as the one who forgives those who come to him for forgiveness of sins. Come only to him; not to the church, not to the preacher, not with protestations of the good works that we have done, of the culture we possess, the education that we have, the memberships in churches and organizations that we may have. But who comes on the simple grounds of need and debt and guilt and receives the free gift. He’s a beautiful Savior, but he is also a judge. And if we do not come, the same one who freely forgives waxes wroth against those who have rejected him.

There’s an old story which I read a few weeks ago about an Indian chief who was told of the Savior by a missionary. The missionary tried to persuade him to accept Christ as his only hope of eternal life. But he replied, “This Jesus life is good, but I’ve followed the Indian road all my life. I’ll have to follow it to the end.”

Some months later he was on his deathbed, and he was seeking a path through the darkness that he saw himself approaching, and so he called for the missionary, and he said, “Can I turn to the Jesus road now? My road stops here with no path through the valley.” There is no path outside of Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life.

But now in the light of what we owe, in the light of the fact that we are infinitely in debt to God, has the wellspring of gratitude been touched, and is it sufficient that when we go forth from this place, Believers Chapel, today, we go forth with the conviction that by the help of God the Holy Spirit, we shall love our brethren in measure at least as he has loved us? My debt was infinite. I’ve been forgiven all that debt. Surely, how can I be disturbed by the little offense that my Christian brother or sister has committed against me?

Robert Murray McCheyne was one of the great Scottish preachers, a man who died before he was 30 years of age but who made a great impact on Scotland. He wrote some words that, I think, are very touching. He said, “When this passing world is done, when has sunk yon’ glaring sun, when

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we stand with Christ in glory, looking o’er life’s finished story, then Lord shall I fully know not till
then how much I owe.” May we bow in a word of prayer?

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee and praise Thee for the greatness of the debt that
Thou hast shown us that we owe. And we praise Thee for the greatness of the forgiveness that has
covered all our debt.

And O God, we do pray that we may be so touched by the remembrance of what we owe
that gratitude may spring up within us and through the Holy Spirit enable us to love our Christian
brethren and sisters as Thou hast loved us.

O God, we pray that in this assembly of Christian believers, the world may look at us and
see that Thou hast done great things for sinners.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.