

Protagonist Corner

“There’s No Getting Around This One!”

Joseph L. Roberts, Jr.

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

In our personal lives, is it not true that most of us try to evade embarrassing situations? We endeavor to avoid taking any responsibility for what we truly know we have done. Isn’t this what “spin doctors” are for? Aren’t they paid to fabricate creditable alibis for us? Don’t they assure us that we have nothing to worry about? Don’t they want us to believe there are no issues we cannot evade? In other words, they suggest there is nothing we can’t get around.

Scripture challenges this assumption. It confirms, over and over again, that life has inescapable consequences. We begin by relating a true experience in the life of Robert Louis Stevenson, nineteenth-century Scottish author, remembered most for his famous novel *Robinson Crusoe*. What we probably don’t know is that a few years before writing this novel, he traveled with his entire family to a desolate south sea island, so he could feel the mood and climate of island life.

Stevenson was also a devout Christian. He began each day with family devotions, the reading of scripture, and concluded with his whole family on bended knees, praying The Lord’s Prayer in unison. One morning, in the middle of this prayer, Stevenson arose and left the room abruptly. His wife, fearing for his health, followed him and asked, “Is there anything wrong, Robert?” He had a sad, solemn look on his face and affirmed that something was wrong. He announced, “I cannot pray this prayer this morning!” His family was stunned when they heard his answer. This was indeed a jarring confession.

Now it was not the entire prayer that disturbed him. It was only one petition that he found almost impossible to be honest about. You see, he wanted to escape this petition, or at least get around it that day. But he didn’t know how. He left the room in sadness, because he knew his communication with God had been ruptured. There was just no getting around this one!

What was this troublesome petition that shook him to his core? It was this: “And forgive us our debts, *as we have forgiven our debtors*. And do not bring us to the time of trial (testing,) but *rescue* us from the evil one” (Matt. 6:12 -13).

I wonder whether we understand Stevenson’s insight, or has it escaped us again? We all ask God to forgive our debts (our obligations to Him and our brothers and sisters. That’s the easy part of the petition. It is self-serving and self-gratifying! The most difficult phrase is, “As we have also forgiven our debtors” (my paraphrase). As we have also forgiven those who owe us an apology. Here is the rub! Forgive us, in direct proportion to our willingness to forgive those who work against us. Isn’t this asking too much? This petition is intrusive; it judges us all. It’s on the street where we all live.

Let’s put it another way. We are always ready to ask God to forgive our *short-changing* others. But we can’t be forgiven unless we have also forgiven those who have short-changed us. In other words, God has the right to expect something in return for something He *alone* can give us—forgiveness.

Robert Stevenson was on point that morning. “Lord, I am not fit to utter this petition this day. My heart is not right; my mind is not made up. I am a Christian bedeviled with a split personality, unblessed, and powerless against the forces of evil in my personal world and the larger world around me! And it’s my own fault; I admit this. For I have chosen death over life. I know the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life. But please, do not bring me to the time of trial, but rescue me from the evil one!” (Matt. 6:13)

In our personal lives, we can’t get around this one! Picture the people you have not forgiven and find it hard to forgive. Let their individual images pass through your memory, one at a time. Does it still hurt, is the pain still there? Two examples make clear the point: Can we forgive co-workers we never liked in the first place? Don’t we try to avoid them as much as possible without being obvious? Can we forgive certain insensitive relatives during some crises occasioned by sickness or death? They are about to get on our last nerve. Why don’t we forgive more readily? Do you realize that sometimes we can’t remember what offended us in the first place? It happened so long ago.

Was the offense really as important as we thought it was when it first occurred? Or could it be that some of us love holding grudges. Don’t we really just want to exercise power over others, even if it is negative power, arising from conflicts we never tried to resolve? Forgiveness is, at best, a chancy, risky proposition.

Someone has written, “Forgiving is love’s toughest work and love’s biggest risk.” Jesus knew forgiveness was risky, yet he declared, “You shall love the Lord with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.” We are pretty good at loving ourselves. It’s the love of neighbor that we find difficult to swallow. Furthermore, we love ourselves and rigorously defend most our actions. We are all self-serving creatures. We find it possible to justify our actions, right or wrong. We stand in front of the mirror and admire ourselves more than anybody else on earth.

“*Forgive us our debts.*” Some of us don’t even believe we have debts, at least not financial ones. Dr. Cornell West has written a book, *Race Matters*, in which he speaks more universally about moral matters. Moral matters include us all, don’t they? Yet some of us declare, “I haven’t crossed the line yet. Besides, things have changed. Many people are doing what I am doing, and they are getting away with it, so it couldn’t be that bad. You’re out of touch. Come on, get with it.”

Our national mood in 2010 is: America for Americans. Yet for some Americans, the moral star is constantly receding, especially if you are a poor Latino, African American, or Caucasian. Adam Smith, that great economist of the eighteenth century, declared that we have no moral obligation to the disadvantaged. He said that “the invisible hand” of the free market would cause all the people in the nation to be strengthened and arise. This has not happened recently. If he were alive, he might declare that we will all rise, with no government intervention needed to help get out of our economic poverty. If we give tax breaks to the very rich, how will this reduce our national debt? (Remember, the top one percent of our population collected 80 percent of the salary increases last year.) What about 99 percent of our population struggling merely to exist on the 20 percent that falls from the master’s table? After we divide the 20 percent gain among 99 percent of our nation’s population, won’t it still be inadequate to meet their basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter?

Jesus prayed, “Forgive us our debts, *only* as we forgive those indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial; but rescue us from the evil one. How will you make it when it rains on your party? You just can't get around this one!

Here sin is considered a debt to God. And our debts can never be discharged or transferred to anyone else. These are individual obligations and responsibilities we all share together. They have our names and dates of birth on them. We can run, but we can't hide. Most important: these debts have the date we became a part of the Body of Christ, the Church, stamped on them.

Forgiveness is costly. It calls for humility and repentance for selfishness and self-centeredness. Forgiveness calls us to place personal relationships far above our material possessions.

I don't know where I ran across these closing thoughts. They are not original; they are relevant:

It's not your neighborhood; but your neighbor, who really counts.

It's not your club; it's your companions, who really count.

It's not your money; it's your mercy that really counts.

It's not your china; it's your concern for children that really counts.

It's not your fine linen; it's your enduring love for others that really counts.

It's not your food; it's your faith that really counts.

It's not our health; it's your healing that really counts.

It's not where you've been; it's where you're going that really counts.

It's not the words you've spoken; it's the bread you've broken that really counts.

It's not your degrees; it's your deeds that really count.

It's not your honors; it's your humility that really counts.

It's not your preaching; it's your practice that really counts.

It's not things; it's your thoughts that really count.

It's not price tags; it's people who really count.

It's not who you know; it's whose you are that really counts.

How is this debt cancelled? How can Robert Louis Stephenson and all of us pray this prayer again? The answer is that our debt is cancelled, not by repentance or good works, but only by the grace of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

You see, salvation is God's deliverance—costly deliverance.

So we go back to our paraphrased texts—Matt. 6:12-13. "For if you forgive others their debts, their shortcomings, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive you....And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one."

Jesus, from Calvary, deals with our gross shortcomings that bring us to tears, both of repentance and gratitude: "Father, forgive them, for they knew not what they do."

There's no getting around this one!