

10 May 2020 – Deuteronomy 15: 1-11 / Matthew 6: 9-15

The Lord's Prayer 4

Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

What version of the Lord's Prayer are you most familiar with – *debts, trespasses, or sins*?

When I was growing up we said the Lord's Prayer in school – I am not advocating for that in our multicultural and multifaith society today, but I remember that when we said the prayer then we used *trespasses* rather than *sins* or *debts*. It wasn't until I came to Knox more than 16 years ago that I started using and getting comfortable with using the *debts* and *debtors* phrase. I am most comfortable with the version we sing on communion Sundays – 469 in our hymnbook – which uses *forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us*.

How is it that we have these variants? Which one is right? Which one is true?

In the body of the prayer from Matthew's gospel, the Greek word translated *debts* and *debtors* has a wide range of meanings all grouped around one common understanding. It always denotes something which is owed – something due – a duty or obligation to give or to pay. It is debt in the broadest sense of the word: at its narrowest it is a money debt – at its widest, any moral or religious commitment which one must discharge.

Forgive us for every failure in duty, for failure to submit to God and to others that which we ought to have delivered, for the debt to God and others which we owe and which we have failed to pay.

In Luke, Chapter 11 we see, *forgive us our sins*. Luke uses a different word, a word for sin but not originally an ethical word. Its basic meaning is simply a missing of the mark – as in missing the mark when throwing an axe or shooting an arrow. Sin is a failure to hit the mark – a failure to realize the true aim of life – a failure to do and be that which ought to have been, which could have been, done. So, although based on different pictures, these words are not radically different in meaning as their authors understand them.

Jesus gave the prayer to his disciples in Aramaic, not Greek, of course. In his time sin would have been understood almost exclusively as a failure in obedience to God: goodness was obedience – sin was disobedience. A person's first obligation was recognized as giving obedience to God and therefore not to give obedience to God would be considered being in debt to God. Both Matthew and Luke need to translate the common Aramaic word for sin which literally means debt. Matthew chooses the exact Greek equivalent – debt, and Luke selects the common understanding of the word – sin.

Although **we** may see major differences between the words *debts* and *sins* – they are both a legitimate translation of the Aramaic used by Jesus. Both are right – both are true. It is our personal preference – our tradition and our history – which lead us to feel more comfortable with one or the other variant.

But what about *trespasses*?

This takes a bit more work to understand. Linguistically speaking you can't really justify the use of the word *trespass* to translate the Greek word in the text. Does that mean translations using this form did a careless and inaccurate job? Not exactly. If you look at verses 14 and 15 of Matthew 6 you see an extension of the petition, a commentary if you will, which reads: *For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

The Greek word used here means a false step or a blunder and it can be translated as *trespasses*. What is assumed is that the translators who insert this word into the body of the prayer take it from these amplifying verses at the end because they want to avoid confusion with monetary debt. It isn't a technically "correct" translation, but we can understand how it might have happened and we can accept that for many in our society it is what they know.

Now that the wordsmithing is done, we can put aside arguments about whether we should be using *debts*, *sins*, or *trespasses* when saying this prayer since all are equally valid – all are correct – all are true.

The Lord's Prayer has its focus in God's saving work. If the Sermon on the Mount is a summary of Jesus' teaching, and the Lord's Prayer is at the heart of this sermon, then this petition for forgiveness is at the very epicenter of the gospel. Reconciliation is the point of Jesus' entire ministry. Thus, forgiveness is at the heart of our relationship with God, of faithfulness, and of life in Christian community. No better word can be found to describe the saving work of God or the day-to-day work of Christ in setting relationships right. Perhaps no other theme appears more often in Matthew's gospel than that of forgiveness.

Matthew gives extraordinary emphasis to how one's reconciliation with God is lived out by followers of Jesus. The readiness to forgive others is not optional for those who have been forgiven by God. "How can you be forgiven if you don't yourself forgive?" has often been categorized as a Jewish overstatement. But the connection between human and divine forgiveness is deeply ingrained into New Testament thought.

Forgive us as we forgive... is not a focus on asking God to forgive in the same way or to the same degree that we forgive. The prayer is not advocating a proportional kind of forgiveness. In this petition we acknowledge that we have no right to pray for forgiveness for our own sins if we cannot forgive those who have wronged us. It is really a prayer for release from whatever prevents us from moving into the hopeful future made possible by Jesus. Forgiveness among humans is not the same as absolution – it is freedom from the past. When we do not forgive others their debt to us, we are in fact not free ourselves, for we remain attached to them. And as we hold them bound, so we remain bound.

Forgiveness often does not come easily – not when it comes to forgiving others or ourselves. We may berate ourselves endlessly for our failures, unable to forgive ourselves even after we have asked God to forgive us. But if we do not forgive others, we cannot experience God's forgiveness ourselves.

Some are reluctant to forgive because doing so seems to discount the seriousness of the wrongs that others do; actually, forgiving says the opposite. Forgiving requires first acknowledging that an act is wrong. If it were not, forgiveness would not be needed. When we forgive, we are saying, "What you did was wrong, but I release you from its penalty."

We also release ourselves when we forgive those who have harmed us. If we do not forgive, we remain bound to the one who has wronged us. Only by forgiving can we put the past behind us. Nursing hurts from the past takes energy, and forgiving frees us to use that energy to live fully and abundantly in the present. The good news is that the forgiveness we extend to ourselves and others does not well up from our own strength but comes from our experience of having been forgiven first by God.

Forgiveness is God's answer to the all too predictable cycles of hostility, violence, and revenge. This petition thus becomes a prayer for an end to wars, feuds, and grudges. It calls for restorative justice and mediation as approaches to resolving conflict and dispute in peaceable ways that promote renewal and restoration of persons to their communities. Jesus reminds us to make forgiving and being forgiven a matter of prayer. Forgiveness is the door to freedom – open your heart to forgiving and forgiveness in prayer – enter into the freedom of God's abundant grace. **Amen**