

The Lord's Prayer: Forgive Us Our Debts
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Matthew 18:21-22

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" ²² Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

Matthew 6:9-13 The Living Bible

⁹ Pray along these lines: "Our Father in heaven we honor your holy name.

¹⁰ We ask that your kingdom will come now. May your will be done here on earth, just as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us our food again today, as usual,

¹² and forgive us our sins, just as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us.

¹³ Don't bring us into temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One. Amen."

I know the burning question on your mind, the thing you came today to get answered, is which is more right – debts or trespasses. William J. Carl, III, says there are two answers – one is an urban legend and the other truth. He says, "The urban legend goes like this: The Scots were merchants, and the English were landowners. To sin against a Scot meant that you hadn't paid your debts, so Presbyterians and others within the Reformed tradition prefer 'debts' in the Lord's Prayer. On the other hand, the English, being landowners, believed that the chief sin was trespassing on their property – thus their preference for 'trespasses' in the Lord's Prayer."¹ Like I said, this is the urban legend version. The "real" explanation is this: "Thomas Cranmer, who wrote the Book of Common Prayer, the prime liturgical source for Anglicans, Episcopalians, and United Methodists, followed Tyndale's version of the Lord's Prayer, which incorrectly translates ὀφειλήματα (*opheilemata*) as 'trespasses,' when the word for trespasses is actually παραπτώματα (*paraptomata*), which appears two verses later in verse 14, after the end of the Lord's Prayer. The Scots, however, followed the King James Version, which correctly translates *opheilemata* as 'debts.'"²

So why are some churches, Presbyterian included, using "sins" in place of either, debts or trespasses? No matter what word you use, the act being confessed is a wrong against another. Whether we've taken something from another that wasn't ours to take - dignity, value, a good name - or whether we've crossed a line, with hateful words or hateful thoughts or hateful actions, we've behaved toward others in a way that keeps us apart from God, instead of bringing us closer to God. We've behaved in a

¹ William J. Carl, III. *The Lord's Prayer for Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press; 2006) p. 59.

² Ibid.

way that God would not. So, whether you feel you owe that person something as recompense, or you regret going too far, or you recall the words “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me,”³ the word we use to confess matters far less than our confession.

There’s that word again: our. And “us.” This confession is not mine or yours but ours; not ours here at First Pres but ours, the children of God. It’s one thing to pray that all people have enough to eat – that’s a good thing – all people deserve to be fed. But what about praying that God forgive us all? To ask God to forgive us all implies a belief that **all** people deserve forgiveness, ourselves included. That may not be so easy. And, even if we can ask God to forgive us all, we still may not be willing to be forgiving – let God forgive them, but I sure can’t, or won’t, or both. Alas, that’s not the intent of this prayer.

Nor is the intent to pray it only on behalf of others. I’ve had a pretty good week, God, so no need to forgive me for my debts but do be sure to forgive those others who haven’t been as good as I. Carl offers perhaps the clearest explanation. “Oh, we think we are better than the town drunk, but we aren’t, because our sin is the sin of pride, one of the worst of all.”⁴ When I was kid, I didn’t understand how it could be both a good thing and a bad thing to have pride – adults would say things like “You must be proud” or “you should be proud.” Why would someone say such a thing if it was bad? And in such a way that made it sound good? I understand the message is that it’s okay to be proud of the “A” I earned on the book report which took me days to write; I can be glad that my hard work spoke for itself. Admittedly, that still feels uncomfortable to me because of how I was raised, and maybe because it means I am taking credit without giving any to God.

The pride Carl speaks of has a different implication. To be proud of myself because I don’t do the same things someone else does breaks my relationship with that person, and so breaks my relationship with God, the God who created us all equal. This sense of superiority which has been reinforced in us, which has been shaped by our families, our schools, our media, our nation, well, it’s not doing us good. It has no place in the church, in God’s family, in this prayer. And it sets us up for defeat as we pray the second part, “as we forgive our debtors.” How hard it is to forgive someone when we think we have the right not to. But Jesus says “let that go; forgive, forgive, forgive.” Not only does he make it clear when he says, “pray then like this...forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,” but he repeats it.

³ Matthew 25:40.

⁴ William J. Carl, III. *The Lord’s Prayer for Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press; 2006) p. 60.

As soon as he finishes teaching the prayer, the next words from his mouth are “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.”⁵ And just a few short chapters later, from which we read this morning, Jesus responds to Peter’s question of how many times he must forgive another. Peter, thinking he’s pretty smart, knowing Jesus won’t say “once,” offers “As many as seven times?” No, Peter. “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” Let go, Peter, of thinking you’ve done enough because you’ve been generous in your forgiveness by your standards. I tell you be generous in your forgiveness by **my** standards, by our Father’s standards. Believe that not only does that person deserve God’s forgiveness but yours because your forgiveness matters.

We come back to that difficult verse 15: “if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” But, wait! Isn’t this the God of love and grace? Didn’t Jesus die for the forgiveness of all of our sins? End of story? No strings attached? Carl says, “The string is this: you have to be willing to accept God’s forgiveness, but you’ll never be able to accept it until you can first forgive others who have done you wrong or failed you in one way or another... This is not conditional forgiveness, for God’s forgiveness is not contingent on our forgiving others. God will never hold back. We’re the ones holding back. We wall ourselves off from God’s giving love when we don’t share that love with others.”⁶ That’s it. We can’t really experience or grasp the depth of God’s forgiveness until we’ve tried it out on others.

I’ll remind you that “forgive and forget” is not biblical. Our memory is a gift but we cannot choose what it holds and what it lets go of, for the more we think of something we wish to forget in order to will it away, the more a part of our memory it becomes. Nowhere in the Bible does Jesus or any of the prophets say that forgiveness involves forgetting. Forgiving does not require, demand, or expect forgetting. What it does require is our effort, our mindfulness. Corrie ten Boom, a Christian woman who was arrested with her family for hiding Jews during the Holocaust, wrote this in her autobiography, *The Hiding Place*.

It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there - the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie's pain-blanching face.

He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. "How grateful I am for your message, *Fraulein*," he said. "To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!"

His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people in Bloemendaal the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

⁵ Matthew 6:14-15.

⁶ William J. Carl, III. *The Lord’s Prayer for Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press; 2006) pp. 62 and 65.

Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? *Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.*

I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. *Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give Your forgiveness.* As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand, a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.⁷

When we cannot muster a forgiveness of our own, let go. Let go of that other pride, the pride that assures you that you can do anything on your own. To come to God in the Lord's Prayer is to let go of our stubborn beliefs that we don't need God for much, if at all, because, indeed, we need God for everything. We need God's help to bring about God's reign. We need God's help to make it so none are hungry. And we need God's help to forgive. So let us pray: Lord, give Your forgiveness. Amen.

⁷ Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*, (Grand Rapids: Chosen Books; 1971; e-book edition created 2011) p. 245.