

# The Prayer Jesus Taught: Forgive Us Our Debts

**TEXT:**  
**Psalm 103:6-18**  
**John 4:5-41**

February 24, 2008

**Y**ears ago, I had just come to a new church and was offering the pastoral prayer for the first time. When I finished, I sat down in my seat, looked over at my wife, Carolynn, and saw her mouthing the words, “That was a good prayer.” I was content and satisfied.

After church, she corrected my perception. Apparently, she didn’t say, “That was a good prayer.” Rather, she said, “You forgot the Lord’s Prayer.”

During this season of Lent, we are studying the prayer Jesus taught. This morning, we come to the petition where we ask for our sins to be forgiven even as we forgive those who sin against us. In this petition, our different translations sometimes get confusing. I grew up in the Methodist Church where each Sunday we would say “forgive us our trespasses.” That is the way most protestant churches recite the prayer. Over the years, I have served as pastor of at least two churches that used *trespasses* each week, as well as one that used the more modern term *sin*. If you looked at the opening pages of your *Hymnals*, you will see the ecumenical version of the prayer, “forgive us our sins and we forgive those who sin against us.” So every now and then, I would find myself in worship in a new church, facing an awkward pause as I tried to remember

what church I am in and how they recited the Lord’s Prayer.

Let me take a moment and offer a brief historical sketch about the word used in this petition. *Trespass* comes from the first English translation of the Bible by William Tyndale in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>i</sup> It was adopted in the *Book of Common Prayer* of the Church of England which was first produced in 1544, several years before the *King James Version* of the Bible. For centuries, this prayer book had tremendous influence on churches in the English speaking part of the world, even in congregations that did not have a written liturgy in their worship tradition. As a result, the word *trespass* became the most commonly used word in this prayer.

English speaking Presbyterians, on the other hand, were influenced by the Westminster Assembly which took place 100 years later. In its catechism, the Assembly followed the *King James Bible*, which had been published some 30 years before, which translated the Greek word more accurately as *debts*. For nearly 400 years, Presbyterians have persisted in using the word *debts* when saying the prayer.

In recent years we have seen the word translation as *sin*, making it clear that what we are talking about more than forgiveness for financial mismanagement or walking on to someone else’s property.<sup>ii</sup>

The point is, each of these words, *sin*, *debts*, and *trespasses* has a different meaning, but they each get at the wrong we do. In their respective versions of the prayer, Luke and Matthew use different Greek words for the word *sin*. In Luke, the word is accurately translated as *sin*, which means “missing the mark.” Matthew, who was writing to a Gentile audience, used a word which may have been more common to his readers. The word *trespasses* means something like “ethical transgressions” or “stepping across the line between right and wrong.” Meanwhile, *Debts* is translated from Aramaic, the language that Jesus spoke, and it means, “failure to pay what is due.” In its original context it was an economic term, it meant what you owed to a creditor.

Now while these translations may be confusing, they are not actually wrong. Each gets at the fact that we are not capable of doing the right thing every time and all the time. That is one of the core understandings of our faith: We are all sinners and fall short of the glory of God. [Romans 3:23] We know that we make mistakes, that we hurt loved ones and friends, and that we don’t always do the things we think we should. This understanding of our lives before God is captured in one of the traditional prayers of confession from *The Book of Common Worship*:

*Merciful God, we have sinned against you ... by what we have done and by what we have left undone.*<sup>iii</sup>

The Bible is full of stories about people who mess up and yet were forgiven by God and used for God's service. Think of it: Abraham, the great patriarch of faith, was a doubter; his son, Jacob, was devious and a trickster; Moses was a murderer on the run when God called him to lead the people out of Egypt. King David, was the greatest of all the Jewish Kings, and yet he, too, was a murderer. Peter, the apostle, denied Christ on the night of his arrest; and Paul, the founder of the church in Europe, was at first the prosecutor of Christians.

It is here, in this basic understanding that we have done wrong, that our Christian life begins. When we honestly look at our lives we become aware of our sin. In our humility and understanding of our lives, we acknowledge our error and our need for God's forgiveness and our need to forgive. Notice that the prayer does not say, "Forgive us *when* we sin," or "Forgive us *if* we sin;" it says, simply, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." This prayer refuses us allow us to hold grudges against our spouse, our neighbor, or that hard-to-get-along-with guy in the cubical next door at work.

Each time we pray this prayer we ask God to release us and set us free from those things in life that keep us stuck in bad patterns of behavior or destructive tendencies in relationships. Each time we pray the Lord's Prayer we open ourselves up to God's good will toward us and the new future God has intended for all of us. Can you think of

how many stories of transformed lives in the Gospels begin with Jesus saying, "Your sins are forgiven?"

This is part of the simple beauty of the story of the woman at the well. In the eyes of most Jews, if they looked upon her at all, she would have been considered a sinner, an outsider and not at all acceptable. But this was not so with Jesus. He looked upon her as a person of great worth, a child of the Holy One, and he gave her a purpose for her life.

As it was with the woman at the well, so it can be with us. We can be forgiven for our past and for our failures in the present, and renewed and set forth with purpose for our future.

*Our Psalm this morning tells us that God does not deal with us according to our sin, but as far as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is God's steadfast love toward us, and as far as the east is from the west, so far does the Holy One remove our transgressions from us. (Psalm 103:10-13)*

This petition marks the start of our Christian lives and it also reminds us that this is the beginning of our Christian community as well. I will have to leave my comments about this part of the prayer until another day except to share this comment by the ethicist, Donald Shriver, one time President of Union Seminary in New York, who put it this way:

*"We cannot step into the circle of God's forgiveness without bringing our neighbor's with us."*<sup>iv</sup>

Let me conclude the message with one of the sayings from the desert fathers that goes like this:

*Once, a brother committed a sin and the elders of the community assembled and sent for the leader of the community, Abba Moses. He, however, did not want to go. They sent another message to him, saying: "Come, everyone is waiting for you."*

*So he finally got up to go. And he took a worn-out basket with holes, filled it with sand, and carried it along.*

*Those who came to meet him said: "What is this Father?"*

*Then the old man said: "My sins are running out behind me, yet I do not see them. And today I have come to judge the sins of someone else."*

*When the people heard this, they said nothing to the brother who had committed the sin, and they pardoned him.<sup>v</sup>*

Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

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<sup>i</sup> Materials in the following two paragraphs are drawn primarily from William Barclay, *The Beatitudes & the Lord's Prayer for Everyman*. (Harper & Row, 1964), 229 and Albert Curry Winn, *A Christian Primer: The Prayer, the Creed, the Commandments*, (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 64

<sup>ii</sup> Albert Curry Winn, 64

<sup>iii</sup> *The Book of Common Worship*, (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 53

<sup>iv</sup> Donald Shriver, *The Lord's Prayer: A Way of Life*. (John Knox Press, 1983), 75

<sup>v</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Desert Wisdom: Saying from the Desert Fathers*, (Orbis, 2001), 48