

Luke 11:1-13 (NRSV)

The Lord's Prayer

(Mt 6.9—15)

11 He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.”² He said to them, “When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

³ Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴ And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

Perseverance in Prayer

(Mt 7.7—11)

⁵ And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ ⁷And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’⁸ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

⁹“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹²Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Forgive Us Our What?

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

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Text: *Luke 11:1-13*

No matter the occasion, whenever I lead the Lord's Prayer, I almost always preface it with something like, "Let us pray with those words that Jesus taught his disciples to pray." Whether we are in a Sunday service, a wedding, or a memorial service, everyone knows what's next. Everyone automatically begins, "Our father who art in heaven ..." Last Easter morning it has been estimated that somewhere in the neighborhood of 2 billion people across the globe recited the words of the Lord's Prayer. In one of the great shows of ecumenical solidarity, Christians have more or less agreed to use the Lord's Prayer in worship. It is the most commonly prayed Christian prayer in the world.

Those who said the prayer in English this last Easter – Protestants, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians – in an overwhelming majority said at one point, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," the same words we use every Sunday. We've agreed on the prayer, and we've more or less agreed on its wording. Quite a feat.

Nonetheless, there are some interesting loose ends in how we word the prayer. One of these was brought to my mind some months ago when Thurston Ackerman asked me if I might preach a sermon on the Lord's Prayer, and especially on why we say trespasses instead of debts. I don't know if Thurston meant it as an innocent question, but truth be told, in the Congregational or United Church tradition, there is something of a history. The church I grew up in steadfastly prayed 'debts,' and I think it still may. One minister wanted to change it, but, let us say, the idea met with resistance. I don't think the congregation had anything against the word 'trespasses,' but it had always said 'debtors,' and it wasn't inclined to change.

This morning I'm not thinking about making changes in the way we recite the Lord's Prayer. I'm glad to leave that alone. But I am taking up Thurston's challenge to look at the wording, and I will try to explain a little about the words 'debts' and 'trespasses,' and as it turns out about sins as well.

As I said, the Lord's Prayer is the prayer Jesus taught his disciples. It's in the Bible. The most complete version of it, and pretty much the version we use, is found in the sixth chapter of Matthew. But before we get to the Bible, let's look at a little more recent history.

On July 6, 1553, Edward the VI, the king of England died. After a failed attempt to pass the succession to a cousin, Lady Jane Grey, Edward's sister Mary assumed the throne nine days Edwards death. It was a religiously potent moment, which is why Edward tried to avoid passing the crown to his sister. Unlike the rest of her family Mary, who quickly earned the title Bloody Mary, was a staunch Catholic. She immediately repealed her brother's Protestant legislation and began a period of brutal and bloody persecution of the Protestants. Most of the Protestants ultimately fled the terror in England and sailed to John Calvin's Protestant-friendly city of Geneva, Switzerland. There, in the safety of Geneva, with the great Protestant reformer Calvin at the head of government, all was convivial. Indeed, between 1557 and 1560 Calvin's Brother-

in-Law, William Whittingham produced the Protestant-inspired Geneva Bible, which became one of the most popular English translations in history. The Geneva Bible is more important than history sometimes credits it. Not only was it exceedingly popular in Geneva, it was the Bible of literature in the works of such notables as William Shakespeare and John Bunyon. For our purposes, its importance lies in the fact that it was the Geneva Bible that accompanied the Pilgrims on the Mayflower in 1620. It was the Bible of Puritan New England. The 1611 King James Bible would become popular in the New World only later.

So, it was the Geneva Bible that gave the Puritans their version of the Lord’s Prayer, and the Geneva Bible, as does the King James by the way, said, “Forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors.” Now remember, the Puritans were our forbears; they became the Congregationalists. In their minds not only was the Catholic Church corrupt, so was the Protestant Church of England; the Puritans saw themselves as the pure form of the church, hence the name, Puritans.

In 1662 the Church of England, the corrupt side, produced the Book of Common Prayer, which specified the liturgy for the Protestant Church of England. Included in it was the Lord’s Prayer, and in the Book of Common Prayer they changed Lord’s Prayer from “debts” to “Trespasses.” You can imagine that the Puritans were hardly likely to accept ‘trespasses’ from a corrupt church. It’s also pretty easy to see, then, where a any lingering Congregational preference for ‘debts’ may have begun. Today the preference for ‘debts’ or ‘trespasses’ one way or the other may largely be of habit, but at one point it represented a bright theological and political dividing line.

So, we have a little history about ‘debts’ and ‘trespasses,’ but Thurston’s question leads us into still another discussion. If the Lord’s Prayer is in the Bible, why don’t we just pray it the way it is in the Bible?

Of course, the first problem is that the New Testament, where the Lord’s Prayer is found, is written in Greek. Not only that, parts of it owes its wording to Aramaic. So, unless we are prepared to pray in Greek or Aramaic, or some combination thereof, we already face a problem with saying it just the way it is in the Bible. As in any language, words in Greek have many shades of meaning. There are several possible English equivalents for almost any Greek word.

But let’s set this problem aside. In the case of the Lord’s prayer, we can translate the Greek words with some accuracy and consistency. But we still have another problem. The Lord’s prayer appears not only in Matthew, but also in Luke, which we read this morning. And the verses we are talking about this morning also appear in Mark. And guess what. You got it. Matthew, Mark and Luke all give us different words. If you look at the slide behind me, you’ll see what I mean.

<p>Matt 6:12 And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.</p>	<p>Luke 11:4 And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.</p>	<p>Mark 11:25 Forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses</p>
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Matthew uses ‘debts’ and ‘debtors.’ Luke uses ‘sins’ and everyone ‘indebted’ to us. And Mark says ‘trespasses.’ It’s not obvious that going back to the Bible is going to help at all.

And today there are accepted versions of the Lord's Prayer that use all three: 'debts,' 'trespasses,' and 'sins.'

At this point it may be fair enough to throw tomatoes at your preacher. Or you might be saying to your neighbor in the pew, "For crying out loud, don't ever suggest another sermon topic to him. He'll bore you to tears if you do. It's worse than PBS – English history and Greek translation. Let's just keep saying trespasses and get on with it." As I say, fair enough.

But if you will permit me a few more minutes, I'd like to venture a few thoughts about why any of this has any significance to us other than that of gaining a little arcane knowledge.

I do think that Jesus is trying to say something that he thinks is important when he instructs his disciples how to pray. But it's not about debts or trespasses, per se. In the New Testament the words 'forgive' or 'forgiveness' appear no fewer than 1147 times. Forgiving and being forgiven are clearly important ideas for Christianity. And in the Lord's prayer, however you say it, we pray every week to be forgiven and to practice forgiveness. And so it's probably worth taking a few minutes to try to understand what Jesus seems to have in mind.

I see three central questions for us. We are to forgive others of something; what is it? We hope to be forgiven for something; what is that? We are asking God to forgive us; is it God, then, to whom we are in debt or have trespassed against?

The problem with 'debts' is that most of us think of money. Are we to forgive the money people owe us. That would seem too narrow, even though I'm sure the people involved would like it if we paid them what we owe them. But even in ancient times there seems to have been a metaphorical meaning of the word 'debts' going on here. That is, if you did something bad to another person, you owed them. If you stole a horse from your neighbor, you would owe your neighbor a horse, or before Hammurabi maybe you would owe him a lot more than a horse. We still speak of a criminal's need to repay a debt to society. And civil courts routinely try to put a dollar figure on what an injured person is owed when they award a settlement. This week a judge decided that some men framed by the FBI were owed over a hundred million dollars for their wrongful incarceration.

In many respects this notion of debts is quite serviceable. There is one caution I would raise, though. Often people think of the debt as a form of punishment. Indeed, incarceration is most often used as a form of punishment. A criminal pays his debt to society by being punished with jail time. The question arises, does punishment ever really settle a debt? Today in legal circles there is an interesting movement afoot called restorative justice. It is fledgling, but it is beginning to get a foothold. Instead of paying for one's crime by punishment (retribution), one pays by restoring what was taken (restoration). In this system perpetrator and victim face one another not simply as adversaries. The perpetrator acknowledges the victim's losses and participates in restoring them, as much as that is possible. Restorative justice recognizes that the harm is relational, between the people involved. And it realizes that punishment accomplishes little. In a system of restorative justice, there is, ideally, reconciliation, both for the victim and the perpetrator.

Religion has often utilized the unfortunate ideas of repayment of debt by punishment. One version of Jesus' death on the cross says that we owe God so much that we could not possibly be punished enough to satisfy the debt. Therefore, Jesus satisfied the debt for us by suffering a brutal, sacrificial execution on the cross. Similarly, hell, eternal punishment, according to some accounts, is reserved for those of us who owe God for our misdeeds. I should

think that religious systems that focus on restoring our relationships and mending the effects of our misdeeds, rather than punishing us eternally for them, are more consistent with the God who is known as love. So, I worry about the idea of the need to pay debts with punishment.

Another point, there is a not so minor semantic point at play in the choice between trespasses and debts. In a sense, trespasses are prior. That is, we trespass, and because of our trespass we incur a debt. So when we say, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," we are talking about forgiving the actions, not the debt that results from the actions. Both may have their place, but it somehow seems more direct that I forgive someone for what they've done rather than for what they owe me because of what they've done.

Another advantage of thinking in terms of trespasses is that we are more likely to consider who the trespasses are against. When we say that we owe God more than we can repay, we may skip right over the fact that who we offended is actually another person. When a spouse has an affair and understands himself or herself to have made an offense against God, the offense against the cuckolded partner seems somehow secondary and unimportant.

So, where have all these rambling thoughts taken us. Insofar as the wording of Lord's Prayer is concerned, it may be said that the meaning of forgiveness in the prayer is of more importance than the choice between debts and trespasses. In either case, there's more than meets the eye in the prayer. In the end, I have to conclude that the offenses we are talking about or the debts we owe are between one another. To the degree that it makes sense to say that God is offended, it might mean that God is disheartened by our treatment of one another. I doubt that God is concerned about what we do to God. God is big enough to take care of him or herself. On the other hand, I do imagine that God is daily offended by the way we treat each other.

But in the end, God knows that forgiveness is the only way out of the mess. On October 2, 2006 Charles Carl Roberts IV killed five Amish girls between the ages of 7 and 13 in a one-room schoolhouse in West Nickle Mines, Pennsylvania. I can hardly imagine the horror it must have been for the children and their families. Surely, if we were to name the trespasses and calculate the debt, they would be beyond measure. But the Amish people responded quite differently. A neighbor was quoted as saying, "I don't think there's anybody here that wants to do anything but forgive and not only reach out to those who have suffered a loss in that way but to reach out to the family of the man who committed these acts." Members of the Amish community visited Roberts family to console them within hours of the shooting. They also set up a charitable fund for his family.

While there can never be repayment for what these families and children suffered and lost, there is bountiful evidence that their approach of forgiveness has led to healing that hatred and vengeance never could.

Yes, God knows that forgiveness is the only way out of the mess. And I take the prayer to recognize that we must forgive in much the way that the Amish did. Only if we so forgive will we create life and reconciliation rather than of vengeance and more death. Our hope is in forgiveness – giving it and receiving it. Amen.