

One of the things that may strike you if you go digging for the Lord's Prayer in your Bibles is the differences in the English phrasing and wording. The King James Version in St. Matthew's Gospel reads: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." In St. Luke's Gospel the wording is: "Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone that is indebted to us." Now first of all, this shouldn't surprise us or alarm us. Jesus doubtless taught this pattern of prayer on more than one occasion and not always with the same wording. As we said when we started this study the Lord's Prayer is a model prayer, not a superstitious chant.

Now, the word "debts" is an accurate translation of the word used by Jesus in St. Matthew's Gospel. But then what about the traditional wording you and I are used to – **"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us?"** How did we come to that?

The first English Bible was done by a guy named Wycliffe in the 1300's. He used the word "debts." In the early 1500's an Englishman named Tyndale, who actually went to Wittenberg to study under Luther, translated the word as "trespasses." Later, the English Book of Common Prayer picked up on this word "trespasses" and our Lutheran English liturgy picked up on it too, even though the 1611 King James Version went back to Wycliffe's word, "debts." The traditional wording of "trespasses" may also have taken its cue from the words of Jesus a few verses later in this chapter of Matthew where Jesus says: **"For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you..."** Of course the more modern English version of the Lord's Prayer picks up on the wording in Luke's Gospel: **"Forgive us our sins..."** Are your eyes glazing over yet?

For those who have ever wondered about it, that's the story. But whether one uses the word debts, trespasses or sins, the words are all Bible words and the important thing is that you recognize they all make the same point from different angles. We have a broken relationship with the God who made us. The word "sin" in the Bible literally means "to miss the mark." God's mark is his holy law. No one has hit the bull's eye. No one has even hit the target or come close.

The word "trespass" means we have stomped down a defiant foot over the line which God has drawn. The word "debt" which Jesus uses here in Matthew's Gospel means exactly what it says, that we owe something, and in this case something we can never repay. Not just here, but elsewhere, Jesus speaks of us as being debtors to God, people with a great mortgage on our lives, utterly bankrupt, unable to pay off our debt to a holy God.

Here in this little word, "debt," Jesus shows us our sin, not so much from the angle of what we have wrongly thought, said and done, bad as all that is, but from the angle of what we have *failed* to think, say and do, from the angle of all that we have neglected and omitted, the love, trust and unquestioning obedience that we owe God and have not paid. We are in debt! Even in our Savior's own depiction of the final judgment, the evidence of unbelief is shown in terms of our debt to God and each other: **"I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat...thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink..."**

For all the things we *do* wrong which need for the cleansing blood of Christ, there are even more things which we *don't do* that leave us in-over-our-heads in debt. For all the things we *commit*, there are ten more things which we *omit*. Christ says: "What about that broken-down soul you did not love enough to offer one kind word? What about the chance I gave you to take a stand for my pure doctrine and you sat there silently as the traitors smeared my name? What about the classmate who was never picked for a team, who was always left out? What about the fellow rolled in the ditch on the road to Jericho? You passed by on the other side, figuring someone else would help him?"

In that scene of the final judgment, Jesus depicts the protests made by the accused: **"When did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger...?"** Yes, but why didn't we see these things? Like the priest and the Levite on the road to Jericho, we didn't see because we didn't love. You didn't love *me*, says Christ, so you didn't love the least of these others around you for whom I also died.

So here we sit surrounded by our trespasses, our sins, our debts, brooding as it were over our spiritual balance sheets, ready to be dragged out of our Father's presence by the creditors – when the miracle of grace occurs. For us who have not loved enough, to see enough, to do enough, Christ comes down that road, loves us so much that he *sees* our miserable condition, and he *does* something about it. He becomes our Good Samaritan, not just by binding up our wounds, but by taking our wounds to himself. As Isaiah told us in that familiar passage: **"He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."** That is how much he has loved us.

I must not think: "If God really knew what I've done, the dark things I've thought, the horrible things I have said, the

opportunities to do good at which I have passed by on the other side, he would not be so quick to speak to me about forgiveness.” He already knows. He knows everything there is to know about me, even my secret sins as the psalmist put it. That means even the ones that are a secret to me because I don’t recognize them. Jesus himself saw all of them...and he saw me...and you as we all really are...and he still bowed his head and said: **“It is finished!”** That one word in Greek, used to mark bills as paid, is how Jesus stamped the end of his work for you. **“It is finished!”** **“Debt paid in full.”**

Knowing all of this about you and everything he has done for you, Jesus invites you and me to pray: **“Forgive us our trespasses...our debts...our sins....”** Christ Jesus would not lie to us. He would not invite us to ask for a pardon which our Father has no intention of giving us.

But why ask for it each day in this model prayer when we already have it? Clearly, only those who already trust in Christ can pray this prayer that Jesus taught us to pray. Only by faith in Christ in the first place can we call God our Father, can we come to the throne of grace. Don’t we already stand in God’s grace because **“while we were still sinners, Christ died for us,”** because Christ is **“the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,”** and because by the power of the Holy Spirit in the gospel, we have each been made to trust this? Luther rightly says in his Large Catechism: **“Here again there is great need to call upon God and pray: ‘Dear Father, forgive us our debts.’ Not that he does not forgive sins even apart from and before our praying; for even before we prayed for it or even thought about, he gave us the gospel, in which there is nothing but forgiveness.”**

But this objective gift of forgiveness earned for us by Christ doesn’t become ours personally and it doesn’t remain ours personally, without the God-given faith which *daily* believes it, trusts it, lays hold of it. Each Sunday we begin our services with the confession of our sins and Christ’s absolution, Christ’s forgiveness. As children of God, we know that this forgiveness is ours, but daily turning to our Father is part of our personal relationship with God. In a way, it’s like a marriage. The wife who has the love of her husband doesn’t tire of hearing him say: **“I love you,”** especially if she did something to disappoint him and vice versa. In the same way, Christians do not tire of hearing the heavenly Bridegroom say: **“I forgive you,”** especially knowing how often we disappoint him. God is not like the husband who says to his wife: **“I told you on the day I married you that I love you. If anything changes, I’ll let you know.”** God constantly reminds us and reassures us of his love for us.

So Luther says in the Catechism: **“We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would not look upon our sins or because of them deny our prayers; for we are worthy of none of the things for which we ask, neither have we deserved them, but we ask that he would give them all to us by grace; for we daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment. So we too will forgive from the heart and gladly do good to those who sin against us.”**

And of course there’s the other part of this. **“Forgive us our trespasses [or: debts] as we forgive those who trespass against us.”** We step on each other’s hearts often enough. Father, help us to be quick to admit our fault, quick to apologize, and quick to forgive. Christ’s pardon in the middle of the mutual hurts of a lifetime is the glue that binds us all together here. We do not earn our forgiveness by forgiving others. Our forgiveness was earned by the Christ 2,000 year ago. But because we know that our Father has freely paid our enormous debt by his Son’s death on the cross, we will find it easy to forgive the paltry sins of our neighbor against us. Any failure to forgive others is a definite danger signal that we are failing to appreciate how much mercy we ourselves have experienced. To refuse to forgive is to say that Christ died for me but not for someone else, that Christ loves me, but not them, that I somehow am deserving of grace – a contradiction in terms if there ever was one – for grace is always undeserved – that I am more deserving of grace than the person who has wronged me. In a way, my forgiveness of others, imperfect as it is because of my sinful nature, is a barometer of how much I have come to appreciate the forgiveness that is mine in Christ.

The last chapter of Genesis tells us that after the death of Jacob in Egypt, Joseph’s brothers said to each other: **“What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?”** Guilt is a terrible thing. They were reunited for 17 years in Egypt before dad died and yet, despite all the evidence of Joseph’s love for them, they lived in dread, poor in spirit, joyless, bitter, carping, angry, with a chip on their shoulders. How much happiness did they give up all those long years by their slowness to believe what Joseph had frankly told them – that he loved them, that he forgave them!

He who has forgiven us long ago wants us to be happy in our unburdened hearts to love and pardon each other. And believing he has paid the debt, believing that while we can never pay it back, it is our joy to pay it forward to others.

Amen.