

A Sermon Series on the Lord's Prayer
Part Eight: “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us”
Matthew 6:9-15; Luke 11:4a
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**The Sixth Petition: “forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” /
Washboqlan khaubayn (wakhtahayn) aykanna daph khnan shbwoqan l’khayyabayn”**
(Matthew 6:12)



Matthew 6:9-15 (NRSV)

⁹ “Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name.

¹⁰ *Your kingdom come.*

Your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ *Give us this day our daily bread.*

¹² *And forgive us our debts,*

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ *And do not bring us to the time of trial,*

but rescue us from the evil one.

¹⁴ *For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

Luke 11:4 (NRSV)

And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

*“There was once a tradition in Russia as Easter drew near: Before going to confession, the members of a household would observe a beautiful home ritual. Each would bow to the other members of the family, including the servants, and utter the age-old phrase, “In the name of Christ, forgive me if I have offended you.” The ritual response was, “God will forgive you.”¹ I’ve often wondered what our relationships would be like if we would make this tradition of extending and asking for forgiveness a practice within our communities? Jesus’ disciples asked him to teach them how to pray. He answered that they were to say: “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done – on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, **and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. For if we haven’t, there isn’t much point in going any further. But if we have, then we dare ask for two great favours: to be delivered from all evil and to learn to live together in peace. For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.”** (Pax Christi, UK)*

It makes sense that after being asked to pray that all might have enough to eat around the world, we now are asked to do the most difficult and important thing in the world: forgive! Knowing the truism of “an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind,” just think of what the world might look like if forgiveness were freely extended! But before we explore the word forgiveness, we first must focus on what it is that Jesus asks us to forgive? I’d like a show of hands: how many of you grew up saying “forgive us our debts”? or “forgive us our trespasses” or “forgive us our sins”? All three words show up in the Gospels in relation to forgiveness. Please take out your handouts as I show you where they appear as we are led by the foremost historical Jesus scholar of our time, John Dominic Crossan, in his book *The Greatest Prayer: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of ‘The Lord’s Prayer’* (NY: HarperCollins, 2010).

Crossan wants us to begin with Mark, the earliest of the Gospels. In an earlier sermon in this series, I talked about how the Lord’s Prayer is found in a nutshell version in Mark when Jesus, facing his arrest, trial, and crucifixion, in the Garden of Gethsemane, **“fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him.⁶ ‘Abba, Father,’ he said, ‘everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.’”** (Mark 14: 35-36). A little later on, Jesus says: **“Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses”** (Mk 11:25). What is important to note here is, first, that we can see how this connects with the Lord’s Prayer because it is the

¹ Edward Hays in *A Lenten Hobo Honeymoon*

only time that Mark uses the phrase “*Father in heaven*,” which is how the Lord’s Prayer begins. Second, what we are to forgive are the “*trespasses*” of others. Trespasses, by the way, is the word used by the Episcopalians / Anglicans, who gifted the world with the Book of Common Prayer, which had a huge influence on how we say the Lord’s Prayer. But not just the Episcopalians (Church of England) but many other Christian denominations also use “trespasses,” including the Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Methodists. Paul Meier, whose book *The Lord’s Prayer: Finding New Meaning Within the Language Jesus Spoke* we’ve been drawing on in this sermon series, indicates that trespasses is his preferred word. For him, it isn’t just about trespassing on someone else’s property but “*it’s an action where you’re violating the rights, privileges, property, personal space, or dignity of another person. Another way to put it, you’re getting into their bubble—the personal boundaries they’ve established that protect them from possible harm, whether the harm is real or imagined.*”² I like this definition of trespasses. We should not invade another’s either physical or emotional space. We are called to stay in our own lanes!

Now let’s turn to the Gospel of Matthew, written later than Mark, which contains the best-known, most-used, and longest version of the Lord’s Prayer. Biblical scholars agree that both Matthew and Luke drew upon Mark’s Gospel while writing their Gospels. Matthew’s Gospel says that we are to pray: “*And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors*” (Mt. 6:12). When I asked those who attended our Zoom gathering on Tuesday night whether they used trespasses, debts, or sins, most answered that they grew up using the word “debts.” Notably, they were from the Reformed tradition: Dutch Reformed, Presbyterians, Disciples of Christ. While the Episcopalians use the version of that is found in the Book of Common Prayer, the Presbyterians are influenced by the catechisms of the Westminster assembly. So the Episcopalians like “trespasses” and the Presbyterians like “debts.” And they do have very different connotations. William G. Carter shares that he: “*recently heard a [story by a] minister who served a little church in a sleepy little town on the Susquehanna River. ‘Sometimes the high school has a good wrestling team,’ he says. ‘Other than that nothing much happens.’ A college professor retired and moved back to the town, back to the family homestead. He was well-educated, well-traveled, and the minister found him to be a breath of fresh air. He had a strong speaking voice, and when he wasn’t assisting in the worship service or singing in the choir, everybody could still hear him when the congregation would say some words together.*”

² Paul W. Meier, *The Lord’s Prayer: Finding New Meaning Within the Language Jesus Spoke* (Benton: Malcolm Creek, 2015), p. 52.

Every Sunday, they would say the Lord's Prayer together. When they got to "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," the retired professor would say "Forgive us our trespasses." With his strong voice, everybody could hear it. It used to annoy the minister.

"Forgive us our debts ... Forgive us our trespasses."

One day during coffee hour, he moved over to the man and said, "I notice that you say, 'Forgive us our trespasses,' even when the rest of us say, 'Debts.' I know you grew up in this church, and people around here have always said, 'Debts.' I'm curious about that."

The retired professor said, "My father was the town banker. He always taught us that debts must be repaid, not forgiven. Every dime must be repaid. It was irresponsible to let a debtor off the hook. And so, our family has always said, "Trespasses.""³

Yes, debts definitely have monetary, material connotations based in the real world of work and commerce. We must always remember that Matthew's Gospel was written to Jewish Christians who would have been very familiar with the Jewish teaching on debt. The laws in the Old Testament Hebrew scriptures were very concerned about *"release from tax and debt, interest and slavery; and special concern for the most vulnerable ones—the poor and the oppressed, the widows, orphans, and resident aliens."*⁴ Their laws spoke to three interrelated issues: debt, slavery, and slavery for debt. Then, as now, interest, usually a percentage of the total amount one borrowed, was charged when someone borrowed money. Then, as now, a loan might be secured by a pledge. While today one's home might serve as a pledge back then a pledge might have included a person or whole families. In ancient biblical times if people could not pay off their debt, a person or their entire family might not only lose their land but they might be sold off into temporary slavery to pay off a debt. Sometimes this "debt slavery" even became permanent. To help alleviate this injustice and the huge gap between those Jews who were extremely wealthy and those who were very poor, with not too many in between, the Jewish governor Nehemiah, who was sent to help reestablish Israel and to bring justice to them after the Babylonian Exile, made both interest and pledges illegal to try and prevent debt slavery (although one could still charge foreigners interest on loans). Unfortunately, however, even without interest and pledges being linked to loans, there still could be a penalty for defaulting on a loan, which meant that someone still could lose their land or themselves to debt slavery. Yet, knowing this, the wise and compassionate

³ William G. Carter, "Still Sinners, Still Forgiven," in www.sermons.com

⁴ John Dominic Crossan, from his book *The Greatest Prayer: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of 'The Lord's Prayer'* (NY: HarperCollins, 2010), p. 145.

Jewish community, going way back to the times of the Exodus, had developed the law of “Jubilee,” through which every seventh year all debts must be forgiven and all those who have been enslaved must be freed (Deut 15:1-3, 12-15,18; Jeremiah 34:13-14).

God said to the Israelites: ***“Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land’.***” (Deut 15:11). Jesus, too, was concerned about the poor and needy neighbor. Wasn’t his last petition in the Lord’s Prayer about feeding the hungry of the world? It makes sense that this next petition should be about forgiving people’s debts, with the full realization that debt could lead to the loss of land and person. Crossan believes that, when we understand this petition in the Lord’s Prayer within the biblical matrix of Jesus’ Jewish followers, we should take the phrase “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” literally at face value. Thinking about this in the year 2021 during a pandemic that has led to people losing jobs and perhaps maxing out credit card after credit card or taking out payday loans with extremely high interest rates, and fully understanding that we are praying the Lord’s Prayer not just as individuals but as a community using the word “our,” perhaps we might be led to reflect on all the ways people are enticed or even forced into debt just to put food on their tables and how it can destroy their lives. Crossan writes that *“Debt slavery makes me wonder if in our contemporary world those places where slavery is forbidden by law have simply replaced it with excessive debt as neoslavery. Maybe excessive debt is a far better way of owning or controlling individuals and nations than old-fashioned forms of direct slavery and direct colonialism?”*⁵ What do you think about that? What about high interest payday loans, the balloon mortgages on homes that brought down our economy, even unjust bail practices that target the poor. This petition in the Lord’s Prayer asks for our forgiveness for allowing these unjust practices that hurt people who are struggling and to convict us to take action to prevent these.

To hammer the message home, Matthew’s Gospel has Jesus telling a story known as “The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant” (Matt 18:23-35). A servant owed a ton of money totaling the equivalent of fifteen years of wages and was about to be ordered into debt slavery along with his wife and children. The debtor went to the king and begged for mercy. His huge debt in its entirety was forgiven by the king. But after leaving the king he met someone who owed him a tiny bit of money, one day’s wages, just a fraction of what the man himself owed someone, but even though he himself had been shown mercy, he threw him into prison. Of course, the king found out about this and said to the first

⁵ Crossan, p. 146.

debtor: ³³ *Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?* ³⁴ *And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.* ³⁵ *So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*” (Mt 18:33-35)

This story shows us how seriously Jesus believed we should be forgiving of other’s debts. But what debts does God forgive us of? After all, this petition states: forgive us God our debts as we forgive our debtors. The answer to this is pretty simple. We remember that we, who were created in the image of God and are also divine heirs of Christ, were created and called to be the stewards of the world. The debts that God forgives us of are all those times when we do not run God’s world responsibly. Just turn on the evening news and you will see that our individual and corporate greed has led to all kinds of problems in the world, from human-influenced climate events, to wars, to famine, to poverty, to violence, to abuse. Oh God, please forgive us all our debts, and help us to forgive our debtors and show mercy toward them.

But is Matthew only interested in the more literal kinds of material debt? This is where it gets interesting. Let’s read on in Matthew’s Gospel. At the end of the Lord’s Prayer there is a sentence we don’t often pay much attention to, which could be understood as a kind of summary statement or as Jesus repeating that part of the Lord’s Prayer he knew that he needed to reinforce for his disciples, knowing that they would have the most difficulty both understanding and following it. After Jesus has taught them the Lord’s prayer in its entirety, he says this: ¹⁴ *For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you;* ¹⁵ *but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.* (Mt 6:14-15). Wow! Not only does Jesus feel that he needs to reinforce this petition of the Lord’s Prayer but here debts get swept up into trespasses. We are to offer forgiveness not only for actual debts but for trespasses, or all those times someone invades our personal space by being inconsiderate, rude, demeaning, belittling.

But that’s not all! And here it gets even more interesting! A little later in Matthew’s Gospel, his follower Peter comes to Jesus with this question: “*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”* (Mt 18:21-22). Did you know that it “was Rabbinic teaching that a man must forgive his brother three times. As one Rabbi wrote, ‘If a man commits an offense once, they forgive; if he commits an offense a second time, they forgive him; if he commits an offense a third

*time, they forgive him; the fourth time they do not forgive'.*⁶ So forgiveness within Judaism is three strikes and you're out! Peter, by the way, thinks he is being super generous when he tells Jesus that he is even willing to go way beyond what Judaism teaches by offering forgiveness seven times. But Jesus says that forgiveness should be offered not three times, or seven times, but seventy-seven times. Flora Slosson Wuellner says Jesus *"was wiping out all calculated response both to ourselves and to others. He threw a legalism of checks and balances out the window. He invited us to a wider place, a freer air, where compassion and mercy are no longer a matter of arithmetic."*⁷ Jesus invites us to make forgiveness a permanent attitude and ongoing way of being in the world in our relations with others. So in Matthew we see the move from debts, to trespasses, to sins so that what we are called upon to forgive encompasses all of human life, experiences, and emotions. The whole kit and caboodle.

Luke's Gospel, which also draws upon Mark, was written not for a Jewish audience like Matthew, but for a Gentile audience. Luke gives us this version of the Lord's Prayer: ***"And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us"*** (Lk 11:4). Now it is true that Luke uses the words "indebted to us" in this petition but Luke doesn't have to work his way through debts, to trespasses, to sins but he gets there right away. Just as the word "bread" in our previous petition could both be understood as material bread and spiritual bread, here the word "sin" moves us directly to the spiritual heart of this petition. Unfortunately, when we hear the word sin many of us default into the list of individual sins that are categorized by the Catholic church as venial and mortal sins. We equate sin with guilt and are filled with remorse. But this really is not what Jesus is getting at and we know this when we look at the original Aramaic word Jesus used—***khtahayn***—which was first translated into Greek, and then into Latin, and then into English as "sin." This Aramaic word ***khtahayn*** is best understood as mistakes, failures, shortcomings, accidental offenses, frustrated hopes, or tangled threads.⁸ I've often thought that, were I to write my own version of this petition of the Lord's Prayer, I would say "forgive us our shortcomings as we forgive the shortcomings of others." Charlotte Van Dyke said that she would say "forgive us for our mistakes as we forgive the mistakes of others."

⁶ Quoted by William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. II, Daily Study Bible Series, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p.193

⁷ Flora Slosson Wuellner, *Forgiveness, the Passionate Journey* (Nashville, Upper Room, 2001), p. 117.

⁸ Neil Douglas-Klotz, *Prayers of the Cosmos: Reflections on the Original Meaning of Jesus's Words* (NY: HarperOne, 1990), p. 31.

With the word “sin” we find ourselves in the realm beyond the material world of debts, beyond the affront to personal boundaries connoted by the word trespasses and are thrust directly into the world of human frailty we all are familiar with where we make mistakes and offend others, sometimes leading to frustrated and broken relationships. Thanks to our beloved Rev. Dr. David Roos, our congregation weekly prays “forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” In this he was following the advice of the 1988 ecumenical community, who rightly understood that Jesus is concerned with everything that has to do with being human: from those who are enslaved by debt, to those who have trespassed and violated the boundaries of others, and those whose feelings have been hurt by what may have been accidental and unintended offenses. Jesus wants us to get up every day and work toward mending relationships and extending forgiveness, just as we are forgiven by God. Jesus wants all of us to experience the joy and freedom that comes from being forgiven and offering forgiveness. And is it not this lightness of being that truly makes life abundant?

This mandate to go out and forgive is so incredibly daunting, but we can be encouraged to keep on trying as we remember that each of us has been given the gift of God’s Holy Spirit breathed into us which not only prays through us but also provides us with the power to forgive. While we do need to use human effort, we ultimately are empowered to forgive because forgiveness is God’s preexistent power working within us and the world, propelling us forward. Wuellner explains: *“Ultimately forgiveness is not our power at all but God’s power flowing toward us, in us, through us, like a mighty river. When we start the journey of forgiveness, we enter that great current. ... How is forgiveness possible? Forgiveness exists already—now and eternally. We do not create it; we enter it.”*⁹ So, this week, as you go out into this beautiful world that we are called to be stewards of, I challenge you to enter into that great current of forgiveness that exists already that is ours for the asking!

Closing Prayer:

Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of your son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your name. Amen. (Book of Common Prayer)

⁹ Flora Slosson Wuellner, *Forgiveness, the Passionate Journey* (Nashville, Upper Room, 2001), p. 22.