

# **“Forgive Us our Debts as We Forgive our Debtors”**

**Isaiah 43:16-21, Philippians 3:4b-14, John 12:1-8**

**Part VI of VIII in the Lenten sermon series,  
“The Lord’s Prayer”**

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From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent 5, April 3, 2022, dedicated to Gretchen and LJ Cooks who were married at First Church on Saturday, April 2nd and always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Years ago, I was part of an interfaith Thanksgiving Eve Service. For some strange reason, the Rabbi in town had been given the “Lord’s Prayer” to lead. While this prayer is composed completely of thoughts and elements of Judaic prayer forms, it doesn’t appear anywhere in Hebrew Scriptures. And clearly, Jesus is not “Lord” in Judaism.

A student in ministry at the time, I wondered what the rabbi would do when he delivered this prayer. Taking off his glasses, he looked at us and spoke to the room filled with expectant (and mostly Christian) worshipers. He said, *“Now, I know that is the prayer offered to you by your Messiah. It is a beautiful prayer – one which I rarely read. I have never actually said it in public. However, I do know that you Christians are both united and*

*confused about certain words in this prayer. And so, before I begin, I ask you – I need to know – are you ‘sinners,’ ‘debtors’ or ‘trespassers?’*” As we all laughed, I thought to myself – “aren’t we all three?” I thought to myself, there should be a “D” choice – “all of the above.”

To speak the obvious, this petition of the Lord’s Prayer is all about forgiveness. But, of what? When we visit other churches (or for our guests or new friends among us), we wonder what our sisters and brothers in Christ will be asking God to forgive – their debts, sins, or trespasses.

Just yesterday, there was a wedding here and the whole wedding party broke up laughing when I said “debts” and they said “trespasses.”

The difference between the English meanings of these words is significant. The use of the word *trespasses* produces a rather odd result. It might make you think of the signs that read, “No Trespassing.” I saw one yesterday that read, “No Trespassing. Private Community. Keep out.” I am not going back there anytime soon. No trespassing makes it sound like God is concerned that property rights not be violated.

*Sins* suggests that the primary issue in our life is our sinfulness and because we are forgiven, we should forgive those who have sinned against us. Debts suggests something quite different, unless we understand it as a metaphor for sins, which most people probably do. But, let me be clear, *debts* is not an exact synonym for *sins*.

As Marcus Borg says in *Speaking Christian*:

In Matthew and in the Didache, the words used are Greek for *Debts* and *Debtors*. In Luke, the forgiveness petition uses the Greek word for *sin* in the first half (“forgive us our sins”) and

the word for *debt* in the second half (“as we forgive everyone indebted to us”). Most likely, the word used in the First Century was *debts* – and since this petition follows the bread petition, actual debts really meant something.

Along with the daily challenge of acquiring enough food, debt was the main peril in peasant life. If a peasant family fell into debt...failure to repay that debt could result in the loss of their land (if they had any), the loss of anything they owned (if they owned anything) or indentured servitude (temporary slavery) until the debt was repaid – which often happened to the entire family. So, debt was a Real thing which impacted entire families.

SO, this petition is asking God to forgive what we owe to God, as we forgive those who owe us (Borg, *Speaking Christian*, Harper Collins, NY, NY, 2011, p.228).

This harkens to the Jubilee which comes up in Hebrew Scriptures and which Jesus emphasizes throughout his ministry. Think about this, Jesus is teaching a subversive way of acting in this world. He is teaching a “Kingdom of God” value and way of life. We feed everyone – physically and spiritually. And we forgive all debts. No one will go hungry and be enslaved or homeless because of economic impoverishment.

Is forgiveness of sins important? Of course, it is! But to think of this petition as simply as forgiving sins narrows and domesticates the meaning of the prayer. This petition and this prayer are much more than a domesticated prayer form. Forgiveness – when worked through true reconciliation – is a powerful and beautiful and transformational act. But, most often we treat it like “letting bygones be bygones.” Let’s dig deeper.

Much deeper than the three words – “sins,” “debts,” and “trespasses,” and all their significant and powerful meaning – is the tough stuff of receiving God’s forgiveness and forgiving others. And I would add – forgiving ourselves – which is often the hardest thing of all.

**So, let’s go there.**

Is there something you have done; someone you have hurt for which you don’t feel forgiven by God? Is there someone who has hurt you to whom you do not feel reconciled and whom you have not forgiven?

Why are we so troubled by this double-edged sword of forgiveness which cuts through the pain of continuous resentments and anger? When you reach this place in the Lord’s Prayer, do you feel a sense of relief and release? Do you feel liberated by knowing that God forgives you? Or do you feel judged as you are reminded of your own failings and your own inability to forgive and thus reawakened to your own resentments as you have not forgiven others?

Have you ever gone into an area with briars covering the ground? From a distance, it looks like you could step gently on these briars and walk on through to the other side. But, once you step in, you realize your pants are caught, your feet and legs are bleeding, and you’re stuck in a painful groundcover through which you must continue, or you must exit as you entered. I feel like getting through the pain of our unforgiven mistakes is like walking through the briars. We get stuck in the briar patch of our hurt pride, our poor choices, our mistakes, our insults inflicted and received, our regrets, our offenses, our injuries, our guilt, and our betrayals. We get stuck there.

But the briar patch turns out to be the least of our problems. We discover the ground beneath us is quicksand which slowly sucks us in. We must move on or we will become entangled in that painful, stinking, sinking space. This is not a good place to be.

Forgiveness is our way through the briar patch and out of the quicksand. It is as if God is cutting away the prickly groundcover and pulling us through to safety when we say, “Forgive us our debts, sins, trespasses.” God forgives us. Why can’t we forgive one another? God moves on past our screw-ups and failed intentions. Why can’t we do that for one another?

Each one of us gets all caught with our own egos. Can I forgive? Will I forgive? We get stuck on our own junk. We get into stinking thinking. In our heads, we replay words like these: “I was wronged. I was disrespected. I was overlooked. I was forgotten. They picked somebody else. I was unjustly accused. I was unappreciated. I was unrewarded.... I...I... I...”

Jesus reminds us that this universe into which we have been born, ties every single one of together. There is actually evidence of this. In the book we are studying on Wednesday, “The Breath of Life,” there is a belief in Judaism that at the creation of the Universe, there was a spark of God, the light of God, placed in every single being – every creature. Not just humans. Everyone. In that spark God’s spirit moves between us.

Jesus frees us from our self-absorption in this prayer: “*Forgive us, as we forgive one another.*” You can choose to suffer by your refusal to forgive. That is a choice. Or, you can enter into the awakening force of forgiveness. You can make that choice, too.

William Sloane Coffin writes in Credo:

*The consequences of the past are always with us, and half the hostilities tearing the world apart could be resolved today were we to allow the forgiveness of sins to alter these consequences. Let's go further: All the hostilities in our personal and planetary life could be ended were we to allow the forgiveness of sins to act as a lightning rod grounding all these hostilities; if we were to say to ourselves, 'the hostility stops here.'*

In Lewis B. Smedes' book "The Art of Forgiving: When You Need to Forgive and Don't Know How," Dr. Smedes lays out a road map to forgiveness – for those of us who do better with maps! His contents include: What We Do When We Forgive, Why We Forgive, Whom We Forgive, and How We Forgive. At the very end of his book, he says this (words I have quoted often):

*Forgiving is the only way to heal the wounds of a past we cannot change and cannot forget.*

*Forgiving changes a bitter memory into a grateful memory, a cowardly memory into a courageous memory, an enslaved memory into a free memory.*

*Forgiving restores a self-respect that someone killed. And, more than anything else, forgiving gives birth to hope for the future after our past illusions have been shattered.*

*When we forgive, we bring light where there was darkness. We summon positives to replace negatives. We open the door to an unseen future that our painful past had shut. When we forgive, we take God's hand, walk through the door, and stroll into the possibilities that wait for us to make them real.*

*Remember this: forgiving is essential. Talking about it is optional. (Let me repeat this – forgiving is essential. Talking about it is optional. WOW!)*

*Remember also: When we forgive, we set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner we set free is us. When we forgive, we walk in stride with our forgiving God. (Smedes, pp. 176 and 178).*

**None of this is easy. Jesus didn't give us an easy prayer.**

Forgiveness is not something that we jump into. It's still a briar patch for many of us – with quicksand there, too.

To forgive one another as God has forgiven us is challenging, often tiring but we need to know we can do it. However, we are never alone. We needn't see this as individual effort against all odds. We've got each other. We can seek each other out. We can talk about our pain and struggles. Talk of your cynicisms and your doubts. Then, after talking, pray together. Pray the prayer Jesus gave us. Pray it as if it were new to you. Pray and mean it! Pray with a deep and abiding sense that this prayer will deliver you – *“God forgive us as we forgive one another...”* Amen.