

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us

Matthew 6.5-15

Rev Dr Jos M. Strengholt

In every worship service we begin with asking God to forgive us our sins. Every time. And this is in accordance with the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Among English-speaking churches worldwide, some versions of the Lord's Prayer are used. They are all basically the same, but a main difference is that some ask God to forgive their trespasses, while others ask God to forgive them their debts. What is it?

1. Trespasses, debts, sins

What do we ask forgiveness for? For sins? Debts? Trespasses? These words are used in our different versions of the Lord's Prayer.

Presbyterian and other Reformed churches tend to use "debts" and "debtors".

Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Methodists are more likely to say "trespasses ... those who trespass against us".

The word "debts" appears in the first English translation of the Bible, by John Wycliffe in 1395.

The word "trespasses" appeared in 1526 in the translation by William Tyndale. And in 1549 the first Book of Common Prayer used that word "trespasses", taken from the Tyndale Bible. This became the "official" version used in our Anglican congregations.



It is not necessary to go into linguistic studies now; all words used - sins, debts, trespasses, are fine. They all refer to aspects of the same issue. We have not loved God as we should, and we have not loved our neighbour as ourselves.

That is the real issue. As Christians we are aware of this moral failure, and that we have an urgent need for forgiveness.

Sin is not a popular word. Men and women rather resent being called, or treated as, sinners.

We are not thieves, drunks, murderers, adulterers, we do not curse. We live decent, ordinary, respectable lives, and have never even been in danger of appearing in court, or going to prison. So what does sin have to do with me?

The Holy Scriptures describe our moral deficit, and it is called sin, in different ways. For instance, the most common word for 'sin' really means: the missing of the target. You should have done something, but you did not do it.

Therefore sin is the failure to be what we might have been and could have been. We have not loved God and our neighbor as ourselves.

Sin is also the deliberate stepping across the line which is drawn between right and wrong. A man knows what is right, and yet does the wrong. We should show kindness but we did not do it.

But sin is also the not so deliberate slipping that you do when walking on an icy road, and you end up in the wrong place. It sort of happened to you. Without thinking you gave someone a mean answer.

Sin is a universal disease in which every person is involved. The petition for forgiveness gives the lie to any confidence in human nature.

Martin Luther said, "we must remark how [...] our miserable life is indicated: we are in the land of debts, we are up to the ears in sin."

By telling us that we must ask God to forgive our sins, Jesus underlines that we are sinners.

And so that no one should flatter himself that as a Christian he is a better person, the apostle John in his epistle warns us, Christians, and says:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us; but if we confess our sins, the Lord is faithful and just to forgive us our sins.

The rabbis in the days of Jesus visualised the impact of our sins. They taught that every sin created a deposit of debt before God, and the accumulation of sins formed a separating wall between the person and God.

On the other hand, every righteous deed contributed to the believer's accumulation of assets before God and so created a kind of bridge to God.

Sins were demerits that separated, and righteous deeds were merits that connected.

2. Forgive

So the rabbi's created this idea of a divine scale - in the one you have your good deeds, and in the other the bad things, and you should just hope and work for making the scales tilt into the right direction.

Now that is a very flimsy view of sin. The first pages of the bible show that a perfect man and woman, by one small act of disobedience, were banished from the presence of God.

To do a million good things, cannot make up for our separation from God
Because of our imperfections.

Jesus takes these well-known ideas of the rabbis and he tells us that we can ask the Father to wipe out our debts! To tear down the wall that separates.

This petition is audacious. It is shameless for a debtor to approach a creditor and ask for remittance. Yet Jesus teaches us to approach God in this "shameless" way! To be able to ask God the Father to remit debt and overlook sins is breathtaking.



It is like going to your bank and you tell the director: I have some problems with paying my mortgage. Can you please forgive the whole mortgage? Just give it to me?

Jesus teaches us to come to the Father with this prayer. Is that not gospel? Jesus prays this with us. With his arms around us, his people, he asks Our Father: "Forgive us our debts."

Forgiveness is offered freely, without us having to deserve it. We cannot do anything to receive it, except pray with Jesus to God. 'Please forgive us'. As soon as we ask God, Jesus steps in, as it were, to point to his perfect life and death.

He paid the mortgage for us, he canceled our debts with God. He satisfied the justice of God, and opened for us, men, women, children, the way back to paradise.

The Lord's Prayer is a prayer of children of God who address their heavenly Father.

So Jesus teaches us here that, even though we have entered communion with God again, long ago maybe, we still are not perfect. We still have to ask forgiveness of our sins all the time. Many times every day!

This reminds me of the washing of the feet that Jesus did to his disciples. When he was about to wash Peter, Peter first refused. But Jesus told him, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.” Peter exclaimed: “Then wash me totally!”

Jesus answered: “The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean, and you are clean.”

A baptised Christian is clean; he has received full forgiveness of God. But our feet still touch the world. We get dirty. We sin again and again. We need to confess those daily sins to God.

It is good to do that in a concrete way. Name them before God. But we do this as to our Father, as it were while we sit in his lap. Father, I am so sorry, I did this and that and I know it does not please you. Please forgive me.

Well, you do not need to wait for Him to forgive. He has already forgiven. You are his child!



Our Father is so much more generous to forgive, than we are to confess our sins. In church we confess our sins before God, each time we come to meet with Him. And He forgives. That is why priests every week announce with words of assurance, that God forgives your sins.

Praise God! It is so liberating! So amazing!

3. The precondition: As we forgive

But there is this one sentence that Jesus adds, that makes this prayer problematic for some people.

“Forgive us, as we have forgiven those who trespass against us.”

Here we have a pure precondition. If we do not forgive others, then God will not forgive us. That is the only way we can understand this.

After Jesus finished teaching his disciples how to pray, he explicitly explained this issue:

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

And this is also fully in line with a parable Jesus would later tell about a servant, who after his debt of millions was forgiven by his master, demanded that a colleague of him had to pay him back a very small amount that he owed him.

The lack of forgiveness of that man made his master decide to not forgive him his millions after all.

Forgiving those who have debts to us, forgiving people who have harmed us, is the precondition for God to forgive us.

But that sounds as if my act of forgiving, secures forgiveness from God. As if I by my good works, earn God's favour. And that is not true.

Let us approach this verse in another way.

If God is my Father, if I seriously enjoy his forgiveness, if I enjoy his friendship, is it possible then to not forgive others? Is it possible to be mean, to be tightfisted, to seek evil for others? No ofcourse.

The Lord's Prayer is the prayer of the Christian family. We address God as Father, we treat one another as brothers and sisters, and just as God forgave our sins, we do likewise to each other.

And if we don't, we thereby show that we are really not members of the family after all.

The words of Jesus are a reality check. Are you able to ask God to forgive your daily sins in the same manner as you forgive the sins of your brothers and sister?

If you feel wounded, hurt, pained, treated badly, how do you respond?

The conscience that is able to ask for forgiveness without giving it is not a conscience living in faith. That seems to be the conscience of someone who is not part of the family of faith.

St John Chrysostom is right in saying, "To ask forgiveness from God as a great benefit, and [then] to deny the same to others, is to mock God."

There is no serious prayer for forgiveness except on the lips of a forgiver; this is no contradiction of justification by faith: as if a revenge-seeking heart could be said to believe in God's forgiveness of sins!

The fact that you forgive others, is a sign that the Spirit of God lives in you. God is a forgiving God; therefore, his children become forgivers.

No one is perfect. We all sin, even in the area of not perfectly forgiving others. But if we have an unforgiving attitude, then we have to search ourselves; how is this possible for a child of God?

And if without forgiving someone we still pray “forgive us as we have forgiven”, do we realize what we are praying? We are praying a curse down on our heads. You then ask eternal vengeance on yourself, if you offer this prayer with hatred in his heart.

Thank God, He does not give his children bad things if they utter dumb prayers...

But let us do something about that hatred, about an unforgiving attitude. And we only learn this gracious lifestyle by being focused on our Father in heaven, and by realising that we ourselves are not perfect yet.

Conclusion

Jesus prays with us to Our Father: Forgive us our trespasses. Because Jesus prays this prayer with us, but mainly for us, we can be sure that our Father will forgive.

Your sins have been forgiven. But God expects us now, to show the same generosity, kindness, forgiveness, to each other.

We all know some people that we deeply dislike; really cannot deal with; maybe we should admit that there are some people we hate.

God wants us to let go of that. You only hurt yourself with this.

Our Father forgave your sins, but he also wants you to forgive those who have sinned against you.

Think of those people. And during our time of communion and singing, ask God to work in your heart. To help you to forgive those people.

And let us ask God to forgive us, for not being as generous as He. He loves and forgives us. So guess what He wants us to do!

+ Amen.