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

Matthew 9a, 12 Colossians 3:12-14

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If you want to start a bit of a controversy, just start asking people which word in the Lord’s prayer is the right one: trespasses, debts or sins. And if you want to add fire to that controversy, start asking about the origins of how those words got into the prayer in the first place.

In The United Methodist Church we use trespasses, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” But if you go to a Presbyterian church, they will use debts and debtors. And in an ecumenical service they might say sins and sin.

Which is right? And where do the words come from? Just google it and you will find you are opening Pandora’s box.

But what gets lost in the controversy over which word is right is the demand of this line of the prayer. Forgive us Lord for our sins --- forgive us for the ways we have wronged you--- AS we forgive those who have wronged us.

Those two parts of the prayer are linked. And just in case we missed it—Jesus continues this idea in v. 14. 14For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; 15but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (Matthew 6:14-15)

Oh my. In order to receive/accept God’s forgiveness we must first forgive others where they have wronged us. That is the real controversy in this line—because that seems so hard and so impossible.

Ok, well let’s start with the easy stuff – the word issue.

Matthew uses Debts in the Lord ’s Prayer itself.

Then in v. 14 and 15 he uses trespasses.

Luke in the Lord’s prayer uses sins.

If you look up the history of how the Modern Lord’s Prayer is put together you get everything from urban legends on why some people use debts and some use trespasses to long explanations of the history of the prayer.

There are stories going back to John Wycliffe in 1395—who uses debts in his translation of the Bible. King James in 1611, also uses debts in his authorized version. William Tyndale uses trespasses in his version in 1526. The first Book of Common prayer printed in 1549, also uses trespasses.

If you love the history of words—I invite you to google debts, trespasses or sins.

But ultimately, I don’t think it really matters which word you use. But trying to figure out which words is right keeps us from what I see as the true controversy of this prayer. God forgive us AS we forgive others.

Let’s tackle the first part of this prayer. God forgive us our sins. Forgive us for the ways we have wronged you and not done what you have called us to do.

The United Methodist hymnal’s prayer of confession words this well.

I invite us to pray this prayer together. As we pray this, ponder the ways that we do sin against God. Pray this with me

**Merciful God,** **we confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart.**  
**We have failed to be an obedient church.** **We have not done your will,**  
   **we have broken your law,** **we have rebelled against your love,**  **we have not loved our neighbors,**  **and we have not heard the cry of the needy. Forgive us, we pray.** **Free us for joyful obedience,** **through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

This pray is a recognition of our humanity. Our struggle with following God and doing what God calls us to do. When we pray this part of the Lord’s Prayer we offer up our shortcomings. We hand all of our sins and ways we have trespassed against God and others—up to God. And we ask for forgiveness---God’s sacrificial love that frees us from our sins. And in God’s great mercy – in God’s love for us that is demonstrated on the cross, God forgives us for all we have failed to do and all we have done that is not pleasing in God’s sight.

God’s love and grace is freely poured upon us and God forgives us and restores us to right relationship with God.

All of our debts to God—canceled out.

All of the ways that we trespass against God and neighbor--- forgiven.

All of our sins--- removed from us.

It is hard for us to accept this grace freely given to us though. We are sure that if God really knew our deepest sin—there is no way that God could forgive us or love us. But God does--- God does know our deepest sin and loves us anyway. This love is the nature of God and in love is how God operates. And in love, through grace freely given on the cross is this forgiveness given to us—which frees us from the burden of sin.

So this prayer reminds us to ask for forgiveness for our sins and to then know the freedom given to us. And like the last part of that prayer we just prayed—we pray that Godwill **Free us for joyful obedience.**  
  
  
Oh if Jesus had only left it there. Why did Jesus has to add this 2nd part As we forgive those who have wronged us. And why did Jesus need to add in v. 14 and 15 at the end of the prayer?

Even Paul in his letter to the Colossians add this line about forgiving each other, just as the Lord has forgiven us, we must also forgive. (Colossians 3:13)

In some ways this second part of this line in the Lord’s prayer feels cruel. Jesus is asking the impossible from us--- to forgive those who have hurt us and our families. And in asking the impossible— if feels like Jesus is withholding God’s forgiveness for us.

The reality is that the hurt caused by other people is very real. From the people who have harmed our families in very huge ways--- gun violence, physical attack, killing them in automobile accidents through negligence. To the hurt caused in seemingly smaller ways ---- words that hurt, actions that demean ones character, small hurts compounded over and over. And they can be caused some times by nameless people---- especially in this world of social media. People can write very hateful and mean comments that can wound us—but can be from people or organizations we have never met. But the hurt and wrong can be just a painful.

Those hurts run deep and it can feel impossible to forgive those people. These hurts can happen recently or decades ago.

And now Jesus is telling us that we have to forgive them or God won’t forgive us? If I cannot forgive others the ways they have trespassed against me, then God won’t forgive my trespasses?

Well I might as well just stop now. Not going to happen, right? Doesn’t God understand how I have been wronged and hurt? God does know—and God walks with us in all of that hurt. And God understands something that we often cannot figure out.

When others hurt us or our families, when we cannot forgive them, we start to be eaten alive by hurt, hate, anger, bitterness.

Hate, bitterness, anger, block us off from the movement of God’s love in our lives.

They shrink our hearts.

They start to build walls around us.

And those walls block us off from others, from goodness, from happiness and most importantly from God’s love.

God understands that if we cannot forgive others, if we cannot break down walls that we have built up, we can’t make peace with ourselves and with God. If we can’t forgive them, we cannot truly experience God’s grace for ourselves. Not because God’s grace is conditional—its not. God’s grace is freely given to us—not earned. But we have to be receptive to that grace. And hate, hurt, bitterness cut us off from that love and grace of God.

It is kind of like a dry sponge. A dry sponge cannot receive water. When our hearts are closed from hate and bitterness we are like that sponge. We cannot receive love, goodness, happiness, joy, grace. But a wet sponge ---can receive water.

And when we begin the forgiveness process when we ask God’s help in forgiving others, our hearts—our sponges become wet and can receive all God seeks to pour into our lives--- goodness, grace, joy, love.

But how do we do this?

First—I want to address what forgiveness is not.

It is not forgetting. We do not forget what someone has done to us or our loved ones.

It is not condoning what that person did and saying what they did was right.

It is not just rolling over and playing dead and letting them walk all over us.

Forgiveness is letting go of the emotion of the hurt. It is taking down the walls we have built up. And in some ways it is standing up for ourselves.

We do this through God’s help. God does not call us to forgive alone. In fact, this prayer asks God to help us. God help me forgive this person who hurt me.

And God does help us. God is present through all of it—and God will help us find the way to forgive. Know that forgiveness can be a process that can take time or it is something that can happen immediately. Forgiveness acknowledges our need to let go of our emotions and the hurt we feel.

The actual process of forgiving can happen in many ways. But I have found that visualizing can help.

1. Write down on a piece of paper the sin that this person or situation has done.
2. Write down or draw what the feelings you have about that situation.
3. Write down or draw what those emotions are doing to you.

Then pray over that piece of paper and offer it to God. You can burn it, crinkle it up and throw it way, tear it to shreds. But let go of it. And as you demolish the piece of paper--- envision yourself giving it all to God.

You can also--- use the imagery of the wall. Make or draw bricks and write on each brick, the sin done to you, the feelings you have and what those feelings are doing to you. Then take those bricks and put them together like they were a wall.

Then take those bricks down, one by one. Look at each brick and then ask God to heal it. Then ask God to help you tear down the wall.

These are not magic recipes for everything to be suddenly perfect. But forgiveness of the wrongs done to us—really does provide the healing we need to move on. Forgiveness really offers that sense of freedom from what had bound us. It offers us joy--- even in the pain of what happened.

How do I know this--- I have experienced it myself in forgiving my ex-husband--- using that brick wall technique and lots of God’s help.

And I have walked with others who have experienced the joy and freedom of forgiveness.

People being almost immobilized from emotions of the hurts--- who through forgiveness are able to move forward in a sense of peace they never thought they would experience again.

People not being able to say this line in the Lord’s Prayer because they knew they had not forgiven someone. But through forgiveness, these people found freedom to say this line and have felt freed from the burden of un-forgiveness.

And there are amazing stories of people forgiving those who have wronged them. John Paul II --- forgiving the person who tried to assassinate him. There is an amazing picture of them sitting in his jail cell.

People from war torn areas forgiving people who massacred their family—often right in front of them.

There is such power in forgiveness – there is indeed wonder working power in the grace given to us to forgive others, forgive ourselves and to let God’s grace forgive us.

This week, I invite us to pray this line and really ponder what we are praying. And to look at the places where we each need to forgive others. Ask God to help you do this--- To ask God’s healing spirit to heal your heart.

And to envision opening up your heart to receive the love and grace of God.

O God, forgive me for the ways that I have wronged you through what I have done and what I have left undone. Forgive me for not forgiving those who have hurt me and my family. Help me find the ways to forgive them and to let go of the hurts and emotions that I feel.