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First Christian Church  
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## A Series on the Lord's Prayer 3. "As"

Matthew 6:11-12

(American Standard Version) Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

(New Living Translation) Give us our food for today, and forgive us our sins, just as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us.

(New English translation) Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those Who sin against us.

(Traditional translation based on William Tyndale's early English translation) Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

I'll never forget the worship service at my church when I was a teenager on the Sunday the pastor changed the Lord's Prayer from "debts" to "sins." All around the sanctuary, there were furrowed brows (I confess I was looking), a couple of persons sputtered, and it was just this huge mumbly moment that day and for weeks to come as folks learned a new habit. But habits die hard, don't they? Those who grew up in American Roman Catholic or more evangelical congregations are likely to have the "trespasses" version imprinted on them, whatever they may say now. Those who were reared in mainline Protestant denominations are likely to know this prayer from childhood as one in which "debts" and "debtors" are used. And despite that change in my teenage years to "sins," when I am praying un-self-consciously, it is still the debts and debtors of my earliest childhood worship services that spring to my lips. "Trespasses," "debts," and "sins." Each way of translating the original Greek can be warranted, but each brings a different theological slant. Let's explore those differences;

**Trespass.** It's an old world. In some ways, it's almost archaic these days. But when I was growing up in Texas, it was a word that you took very seriously. Driving through the barbed-wired fenced countryside, every few yards there was usually attached to those

fences small metal signs, often pockmarked from the various BB guns and shotguns aimed at it over the years, which said “No trespassing.” Many then went on to say: “Violators will be prosecuted.” One creative person had signs that said “No trespassing. Violators will be forced to babysit our children.” To trespass – the word comes from ancient French and Latin words that mean to “pass over” – meant and still means to pass over to a place where you shouldn’t be, to cross a line that you shouldn’t cross, to go somewhere or be someplace where you’re not entitled to go or be.

**Debts and debtors.** We know about debts. The average American household last year had \$15,000 in credit card debt, and the credit card debt of all Americans totals 712 billion dollars. This doesn’t count the ten-and-a-half **trillion** dollars of other kinds of consumer debt in America. Debt is serious business, and several professions, especially ones that don’t pay well, are coming to a crisis point as new potential hires are saddled with an average of \$49,000 in student loans and so end up not in the profession that they hoped to be in because they can’t afford it.<sup>1</sup> Debt is about money, and our ears perk up and our brows furrow when the subject of money is mentioned. I once found myself with about half a dozen kittens to be rid of. A wise friend counseled me not to advertise them for free, but to put a price – even if it were only five dollars – on them, because when we’re talking “real money” folks suddenly get more serious. And, in its own way, to be “in debt” is also something akin to trespassing; that is, when you are in debt, it may mean - as so many Americans have found – that you find yourself where you wish you weren’t, a place you shouldn’t be. It’s to be reminded that you are in a position where someone else has a claim on you, and it makes it so much harder to pledge yourself and your resources to God when you have pledged some much of yourself to so many other things.

And, finally, **sins**. The most literal translation here of the Greek word “hamartia” means “to miss the mark.” Its original context was that of an archer whose arrow missed the

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<sup>1</sup>All figures are from  
<https://www.nerdwallet.com/blog/credit-card-data/average-credit-card-debt-household/>

target. But that fits, doesn't it? For haven't you sometimes found yourself a long way from where you had aimed? The target is over there, but you're over here. I'm reminded of the last time I went skeet shooting and there was no threat to the poor defenseless skeet because they were always over there and my shots were always over here. An Australian preacher tells the story of a young boy who received a bow and arrow set one Christmas. Try as he might the little boy couldn't hit the bull's eye. So instead he took a sheet of blank paper and wherever his arrow landed he carefully drew his target around it - and he had his bull's-eye!<sup>2</sup> We laugh but I know that I also wince a little. For that little boy has been me more than once, declaring that wherever I found myself – through my own carelessness, inattention, insensitivity, stupidity or whatever – was actually where I intended to be. One of our children when he was three or four once saw some birds outside and said “Look at that pound of birds.” The other children, always considerate, helpful, and sweet, immediately ridiculed his misplaced word. Finally, with his face red with embarrassment he loudly if mistakenly defended himself: “I meant to say a ‘pound’ of birds!!” Yes, we sometimes miss the mark but move the target so as to pretend that's what we meant to do all along.

Whether debts, trespasses, or sins, it's very clear that Jesus is talking about some serious business here, and that he understands our capacity to get ourselves in places where we shouldn't be, to get ourselves buried in a load of obligations that we shouldn't have, to rationalize our ending up in very different places than we had been aiming to go. And what does Jesus say in the face of all that? How does he counsel us to pray in the face of those realities of our lives that can be lived so beautifully and yet sometimes so imperfectly, so missing the mark?

He says this “*Forgive us.. **as** we forgive our debtors.*” “**As.**” What a little word, but what a huge amount turns on it. But, of course, even in everyday life that's often the case – it's the smallest words that sometimes carry the most freight, can do the most good or cause

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<sup>2</sup><http://peterjblackburn.com/sermons/pb010909.htm>

the most harm. The phone call that comes at 1:00 a.m. and your teenager says “I’m alright, *but I kind of wrecked the car...*” Or that tiny word that can change your life irrevocably and completely, one way or the other: “Will you marry me?” “**Yes.**” “**No.**” And now, in this prayer that Jesus offers for our imitation, we too have a little but enormously freighted word. One writer points out that this is the only line in the prayer that has a reason, a rationale, attached to it.<sup>3</sup> That is, this petition, this request of God here, is not simply “God please do this” but “God do this *because of* something else.” That word “as” signifies that there is *some* sort of **relationship**, some cause and effect in Jesus’ mind, between what we do in the face of **our** debtors, **our** trespassers, those who sin against **us**, and what we want God to then do. And it all does hinge on that one tiny word, “as.” How do translators deal with this word? Well, some translations have it this way: “Forgive us our debts, **since** we have forgiven our debtors.” But surely that can’t be right. I mean, I can imagine the reaction I might get if I walked into the bank and said “*Good morning, I want you to forgive the loan you made to me for my car since I let the guy at work off the hook for the \$10.00 he owes me from the time he didn’t have money for lunch.*” I suspect you won’t get very far.

No, the word here just cannot be “**since.**” Why? Well, the first problem is that asking God to forgive us on the basis of **our** having forgiven immediately turns our relationship with God into a complex calculus of *bartering*. Is my forgiving the person who spread an unkind rumor about me equivalent to God’s forgiving me for saying a hurtful word to someone even when I knew better? You can see how complex this would get – and you can see how it ends up putting you in the position of trying to make endless bargains with God. And it will end up with us feeling like we can never do enough, never forgive those sins against us enough to deserve God’s forgiveness of our debts, our sins, our trespasses. And that leads to despair in the face of a God whom we think somehow can never be satisfied. That is the key insight that drove Martin Luther in the opening years of

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<sup>3</sup><http://www.berith.org/sermons/lp/lp09.html>

the 1500s to break with the Roman Catholic church and to say that one's relationship with God is never about how much we can do to deserve God's forgiveness or salvation; no, the truth is that God is gracious to us simply because God is infinitely and always gracious. That is just who God is.

To put all this more simply, God doesn't forgive us **because** we forgive others. In fact, God doesn't do **anything** based solely on whether **we** do something or not. For that would make God subject to the very same imperfections that I am. It would mean that if I were too dense, or too stubborn, or too muddled to forgive someone that God wouldn't be free to forgive that person either. I'll say it plainly: God's behavior does not depend on our behavior – much as we might sometimes think or act as if that were so. And much as we might wonder what it was that we did that *caused* God to do something, it is a terrible mistake to think that way. For it makes God as small and imperfect as we are, and it leads us, as I say, to despair about ever measuring up enough, ever doing enough, ever getting it right enough to deserve God's blessing, God's forgiveness.

So back to where we started: what IS the connection, then, between our forgiving others and God's forgiving us? What IS the meaning of that little word that gets translated "as"? Well, once again we find ourselves in the same place as we ended up on our first two Sundays in this series: this instruction by Jesus with its little word "as" is a **challenge** to you and to me. One preacher sums it up beautifully in this way: "...[We] who are saved by grace alone, must show gratitude for grace in [our] attitudes toward others...."<sup>4</sup> But why is it so difficult sometimes for us to forgive our debtors, those who trespass or sin against us? I think often it is because of our failure to see **ourselves** clearly. Jesus, in fact had something to say about that, didn't he? It comes just a few verses after the Lord's Prayer when he says this: "...how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while [there is a] log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye...." (Mat 7:3-5 NRSV). I don't know about you, but those words make me

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<sup>4</sup><http://www.berith.org/sermons/lp/lp09.html>

wince with recognition, and the words of a preacher named Tim Perkins could be my words when he says:

*I know what it is to withhold grace and forgiveness. I know what words and actions will inflict the most pain on the ones I love and sometimes I go ahead and say them.... I don't know about your debts... but I know about mine. I know my failings as a father and... as a husband and as a Minister.... I know [the] ways that sin keeps me from ...doing what God wants. I'm the biggest debtor I know.*

And then he goes on to add “*And you know what, you are the biggest debtor you know.*” Do you recognize how true that is? It takes both courage and Christian maturity to recognize and acknowledge that indebtedness.

And what should we learn from that recognition? Well, first of all, we can't seek forgiveness if we are not **honest** about what we have done, where we have trespassed. Such clarity can be hard work and it can be painful work. But it is necessary if you are going to move forward. And it is the only thing that will allow you to hear and believe the Gospel: that God wants to forgive you and allow you to move forward, that God wants you to be marked by the realization of where you have sinned and trespassed. Not so that you can simply feel guilty, but so that, first, by remembering where you sinned that you might be better able not to do so again, second, **and** so you can fully receive the gift of amazing grace even when you feel you don't deserve it. That's what God does for you and for me: calls us to be honest about our own failings and sins, marks us so that we can change, and forgives so that we can move forward. That's an amazing thing that God offers us, that God does for us. And, again in preacher Perkins' words, “*...in light of that[, for us] to withhold grace from some other poor debtor is just... unacceptable.*”

I can't put it any better than that. “As we forgive our debtors” is indeed the challenge to **us** to respond in the same way on this earth as God, thankfully, responds to us from heaven. Amen.