



Why Do We Need to Keep Praying “Forgive Us Our Debts”?

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An Essential Truth

I remember hearing a pastor say years ago that you could give the secret to a good marriage in just one word. The word he gave was not money or sex or communication or even love. The word was forgive. Forgiveness is the key ingredient not only in marriage but in any relationship involving sinners. If your friends are going to stick around, if you are going to see your relatives more than once a year, if you plan to work in the same place with the same people for any length of time, if you want to be happy in the church (or simply not give up on the church), you need to learn forgiveness. You need to grant it, and you need to receive it.

What's true in our horizontal relationships is also true in our vertical relationship. Of course, God is not a sinner. He never needs to be forgiven. But if we are to have a healthy relationship with our heavenly Father, we must often come before him confessing our sins and asking for grace.

We can look at this fifth petition in those two categories: our vertical relationship with God and our horizontal relationships with others. We can label these two realities the

forgiveness we need to receive and the forgiveness we need to give.

The Forgiveness We Need to Receive

We need daily bread that we might live and daily forgiveness that we might not die. If we ask every day for bread, it stands to reason that we also ask God every day for grace for our debts. We owe to God what we cannot pay. That makes us debtors.

Does it matter if we say “debts and debtors” or “trespasses and those who trespass against us”? We need an international council to settle this and make corporate prayer much easier! It doesn’t matter a lot, but it may matter a little. [Matthew 6:12](#) has the word debts, [Matthew 6:14](#) has trespasses, and [Luke 11:4](#) has sins—three different English words for three different Greek words. So whether we pray for our *debts* our *trespasses* or our *sins* to be forgiven, we pray biblically. The words mean roughly the same thing.

But they don’t mean exactly the same thing. The word *trespass* suggests that we have violated a rule or committed an infraction. The word *debt* suggests we owe God something we cannot pay. “Forgive us our debts” suggests that we have done things that we should not have done, and left undone things we should have done.

“Forgive us our trespasses” comes from the Book of Common Prayer, which is why many people use the word *trespasses*. The Geneva Bible and the King James Bible used the word *debts*. If you know your church history, you know that the Book of Common Prayer was and is still used by the Anglican Church. So denominations that came out of the Church of England—Episcopal, Wesleyan, Methodist—tend to use trespasses, while most everyone else says *debts*.

The only other place the Greek word *opheilema* (debt) occurs in the New Testament is in [Romans 4:4](#), where it clearly refers to a debt, or what someone is owed. Likewise, the word *opheiletes* is consistently employed to mean “debtor” in the rest of the New Testament ([Matt. 18:24](#); [Luke 13:4](#); [Rom. 1:14](#); [4:4](#); [8:12](#); [15:27](#); [Gal. 5:3](#)). Every English translation I can find, except for the loosely translated New Living Translation, uses “debts” in Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer.

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More important, however, than getting the word right is getting the idea right. Every day, we live as debtors to mercy. Do you believe that? Do you believe that just as you have needs to ask for every day, so you have sins that need to be forgiven every day? And notice the word in the prayer is not *debt* but *debts*, as in many. Every single debt deserves to be met with God's righteous displeasure, but think about the many debts we owe to God, debts that we are powerless to pay. Herman Witsius makes this point powerfully:

Had we contracted by one debt of this kind, would not the thought of it have been enough to fill our mind with indescribable horror? But we are chargeable with *debts*—debts of every description: original, imputed, inherent; [and] actual, debts of omission and commission, of ignorance, infirmity, and deliberate wickedness, without limits and without number.¹

At this point, some Christians may ask, "Why, if we have already been redeemed, cleansed, and justified, do we need to keep asking for forgiveness?" I remember well at my church a godly woman who objected to our weekly confession of sin. She thought it was a real downer and encouraged wallowing in our sins when God wanted us to know we were forgiven and free. She believed it was wrong for justified sinners to return to their sins over and over.

So why does Jesus teach us to pray, "Forgive us our debts," and not just once but frequently, if not daily? Well, for starters, we still sin. We ask for forgiveness for our debts because we never stop being debtors. But more than that, it's because Jesus wants us to relate to God not just as a judge but as a father. This is such an important point and one that sincere Christians often miss. If you think of God only as judge, then you are either innocent or guilty. You are justified or not justified. You don't think in terms of pleasing or displeasing God. You think only in terms of the legal

declaration of righteous or not righteous. As important as it is to recognize that God is judge, if that's the only way you relate to him, your Christianity will become stilted and stale.

God is also our Father, and that's explicitly how Jesus wants us to address him in the Lord's Prayer. A good father always loves his children, but he can be pleased or displeased with them. You wouldn't go back to the judge to admit another mistake, but you would go to your father to say you're sorry. When my kids do what they shouldn't do or fail to do what I asked of them, I don't want them fearing that they are going to be disowned and booted out of the family. But neither do I want them to think that their disobedience is no big deal. If they are good children—and if they know I am a good father—they will come to me and acknowledge their sins, and I will be eager to forgive them.

So if I sin as a Christian, I should not fear condemnation, for there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, but I should still feel pricked in my conscience. I should not despair, but I should feel guilty when I do things that deserve to be punished. I have disrupted the Father-son relationship I enjoy with God. That's why I should ask for forgiveness—not to be justified all over again, but because I have made a mess of the most important relationship in my life. The prayer "Forgive us our debts" is the cry not of a frightened litigant but of a loving child.

Notes:

1. Herman Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations on the Lord's Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2010), 313. For ease of reading, I slightly altered the punctuation in the quotation.

This article is adapted from [The Lord's Prayer: Learning from Jesus on What, Why, and How to Pray](#) by Kevin DeYoung.

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