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East Liberty Presbyterian Church
September 12, 2010, Rally Day
Matthew 6:7-15
“Debts vs. Trespasses”

In this world, there are groups with irreconcilable differences: Palestinians and Israelis, conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats, Steelers fans and Browns fans. I've chosen today to tackle one of these thorny issues, namely, “Which word are we supposed to say when praying the Lord's Prayer: ‘debts’ or ‘trespasses’?” In truth, exploring this topic fits perfectly into our Rally Day Sunday, reminding us of the importance of bible study for every believer. And this word study will move us into a larger discussion of what are human sins and what does it mean to worship a God who forgives sins.

Why do we pray the Lord's Prayer? The short answer to that is because Jesus tells us to. In Matthew and Luke, the story is told how the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. Now prayer is a big subject, so Jesus described for them a short prayer that summarizes all the important things to be included when praying to God. Remember when Jesus was asked “Of all the laws of Moses, which commandments are the most important?” and he summarized the entire Torah in two main commandments: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. In the same way, there is a long Jewish prayer called the Shemoneh Esreh, which means the Eighteen Benedictions. This is prayed three times a day and offers various petitions up to God. The Lord's Prayer is an informal summary of this longer prayer. It is succinct in its requests and bold in addressing God as “Abba”, Father, Daddy; and over time the Lord's Prayer has become a distinctive mark of the communities of believers committed to following Christ.

An entire sermon could be preached on each of the nine stanzas in the Lord's Prayer, but I'm just going to focus on stanza six: “Forgive us our debts or trespasses, as we forgive our debtors or those who trespass against us.” So, which word did Jesus use? Neither, in that Jesus did not speak English. More than likely, Jesus took a longer Hebrew prayer and summarized it in the common language of his region, Aramaic. Later, a description of this summary was included in Matthew's gospel, written in Greek. As the bible was organized for Christian worship, both the Old and New Testaments were then translated into Latin and only in the Middle Ages did someone take a first stab at translating the Latin version into English.

Since we don't have an Aramaic gospel, we look to the Greek language gospels as the best resource for determining what Jesus really said long ago. As I mentioned, this prayer is included in Matthew and Luke. The problem is, for this stanza, they use different verbs: Matthew says “forgive us our debts” and, guess what, Luke says “forgive us our . . . sins.” So where does trespasses come from? It comes from another synonym for sins, and you heard it in the very next verse after the Lord's Prayer in Matthew's gospel, where it says, *If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive your trespasses.*

There are three synonyms associated with this stanza of the Lord's Prayer: debts, sins and trespasses. How did we end up with two dominant versions? As far as I can tell, every bible translation of Matthew 6:12 uses the phrase "forgive us our debts" except for one version – the Tyndale version of 1525. As this scripture worked its way from Greek to Latin to Old English, it was always translated as "debts" or "sins", including the earliest English translation done by John Wycliffe in 1382. But after the invention of the printing press, William Tyndale did an English translation of the New Testament, which was the first printing press version of the English bible. And Tyndale alone – not John Wycliffe before nor the King James Version after – Tyndale alone used the phrase "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Henry VIII loved Tyndale's version of the bible, so between the Anglicans and having the "trespasses" version included at some point in the Roman Catholic English catechism, we ended up today with two competing versions of this line from the Lord's Prayer.

Richard Szeremany, our music director emeritus, in his wisdom used to sit back on the organ console, and when it came to this part of the Lord's Prayer, he'd simply say, "Lord, forgive us as we forgive others." Is there much difference between these three synonyms of debts, sins, and trespasses? Not really. That is why in our worship services here we encourage you to say the version with which you are most comfortable. The Greek word for "debts" means literal debts, something owed to someone else, as well as figurative debts, ways we fall short of goals and proper standards of behavior. Think of it as "sins of omission," failing to take advantage of every possible opportunity to do that which is good. The Greek word for "trespasses" means faults, mishaps, or straying from the path of righteousness. Think of it as "sins of commission," doing those things we ought not to do. Both words, debts and trespasses, are synonyms for the word "sins," which is the real focus of this stanza anyway.

What are sins? Sins are what everyone else does that really ticks us off, but when you or I do it, it's simply an honest mistake. No, that's not quite right – let's try that again. All of us have been created in the image of God. The likeness of God, whatever our gender, skin color, sexual orientation, age, height, or weight, is in us. But it must be acknowledged that this likeness is imperfect or incomplete, because, unlike God, we are finite, not eternal; and unlike God, we are changing and fickle and fallible. Sin is that which obscures and distorts the image of God within us.¹

Can we be more specific about what sin is? We can speak about debts – about falling short of the standards God sets for us and Christ literally embodied for us. It's like the parable of the sheep and goats (Mt 25:31-46). Jesus sent away one group who did not welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, or feed the hungry, saying that when you did *not* do these things to one of the least of my family, you did not do it to me. We can also speak about trespasses – when our deeds step over a line or stray from the right path. It's like the Israelites growing impatient waiting for Moses to come down from Mt. Sinai, so they melt their jewelry and form a golden calf as an idol to worship instead of God (Exod. 32). Sins are things we do and good things we fail to do. Sins are also personal and communal. Sins are when we waste food, pollute the earth, lie to others, and

withhold from those in need. Sins are when we, as cities, nations and churches, waste resources, pollute the earth, lie and break promises, pass laws that withhold basic necessities from those in need, and engage in wars that kill the young and innocent. Sin is more than moral laws we break. Sin is denying that God is God, denying that we are utterly dependent on God and called to live in mutual, caring relationships with everyone else – and thus the image of God in us is distorted and obscured. Which is why we pray, “Abba, forgive us our debts, trespasses, our sins as we forgive those who are in debt to us, who trespass and sin against us. Otherwise, we are lost and utterly alone.”

Let me conclude with two quick points. Our prayers for forgiveness are not empty words. They are not bottle-rockets lit and shot off sending sparks into a night sky only to burst and fade away and be forgotten. We pray these prayers to Abba, our God, who is constant in the desire to forgive, who is ever ready to hear our prayers, and whose grace is sufficient for all our needs. That is the hope and promise that enfolds us when we bow our heads to say “Our Father. . .”

Second, I recently heard a lecture recorded at the Chautauqua Institute this summer. The lecturer was Molly Williamson, an expert on politics and energy, who said this startling phrase: In our world, “resource related conflict is not inevitable.”² It wasn’t a faith statement, but it had definite faith implications. When she said, “resource related conflict in this world is not inevitable,” I thought, “Are you crazy?!” Haven’t we always been told the scarcity of national resources will inevitably lead to war? That the global, rabid demand for oil will keep the Middle East full of unrest forever, and that the scarcity of clean water will likely lead to violence in Israel and ecological catastrophes in Africa? Williamson argued that such conflicts and wars are only inevitable if we do nothing to find answers on how to develop clean, reliable forms of energy that will be available to all the world. As I heard her speak those words, I thought to myself, I always assumed such wars over oil and coal and clean water were inevitable because human beings are sinful, because we are so fixated on our own selfish needs and wants that we will inevitably end up at war over the limited resources available on earth.

But what if Christ said that same phrase to us: Resource related conflict is not inevitable, because sin is not absolutely inevitable. Yes, we fall short of the image of God. Yes, we commit sins of commission and omission, trespasses and debts. But that is not the final word. Forgiveness is. Mercy is. Prayer is. *Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Grant us strength to resist temptation. Spare us from evil and times of trial. For you, Abba, are God. To you is true power, power for and power with, not power over. To you is glory and praise and hope and life, now and forever.* Sure, the Lord’s Prayer is a summary. But it says all that needs to be said. And by saying it, praying it, believing it, sin is not inevitable.

AMEN

¹ Cf. Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 1991, pp. 130-135.

² Molly Williamson, “Getting Beyond the Politics of Petroleum,” July 22, 2010, Chautauqua Institution.