

Debts and Debtors

Matthew 6:9-15; Luke 11:1-4; Deuteronomy 15:1-11

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We used to gather at my grandmother's house for Thanksgiving dinner. There would be any number of people there—extended family, sometimes college or seminary friends who would come home with one of us, a lonely neighbor. My grandmother always wanted us to say the Lord's Prayer as the blessing for the meal, which was a lovely idea. Except for that one line. Some of us were accustomed to saying "debts and debtors;" others "trespasses and those who trespass against us;" and my grandmother herself, who went to the Christian Church, used "sins and those who sin against us." You've probably experienced that same awkward moment, when you don't know what to say for that line. So my grandmother solved it by saying, "Use whatever words you're used to." We sounded something like "Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our mumble as we forgive mumble mumble mumble And lead us not into temptation." We didn't all have to say the same thing for the prayer to be meaningful.

The sermon request for today is why Presbyterians say debts and debtors and not trespasses and not sins. We're a bit lonely out on the debts and debtors island, so why have we stuck with it?

There's a couple of ways to approach this question. One is a New Testament language answer. One is a history lesson. And the final approach is a "What in the world difference does it make, anyway?" Let's dive in.

The Lord's Prayer, in different forms, appears in both Matthew and Luke. The line in question has different Greek words in Matthew and Luke, which sets up the differences for the next couple of millennia. They're translated pretty consistently in the version we have in the pews, so we're going to dispense with the Greek of it all and just use the English ones. The sentence in question in Matthew 6:12 says "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." That is fairly clear and straightforward, yes? That "debts" word is used throughout the Gospel—mostly in parables—to talk about financial debt and debt forgiveness. It's also used to denote a debt of duty, or something we are obligated or ought to do. So it's clear that it carries both a literal and a figurative meaning.

Luke's version is more of a mixture. Our translation says "forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." The word "sins" there is consistently "sins" throughout the gospels. It's the normal word for sins. But then Luke goes to "indebted," which is the same root word as Matthew's "debtors," just conjugated differently. I'm not capable or qualified to explain the different shades between debtors and indebted, but I can note that it's all from the same root word, and it's different than the word used for sins.

That explains debts and sins, but where in the world does "trespasses" come from? Flip back to Matthew. Just after the prayer, in verses 14 and 15, here pops up "trespasses," a totally different word from either debtors or sins. "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." It's also used, though less frequently, throughout the New Testament, as kind of a fancy word for "sin." It also has a connection to property—as in No Trespassing signs—but carries both literal and figurative meanings, just like debts does. Incidentally, the same verb is used for "forgive" with debts, sins, and trespasses.

So the Greek word answer to "Why do we use debts and debtors" is that we're following Matthew rather than Luke. People who use sins are kind of following Luke. And people who use trespasses have substituted in a slightly different synonym.

The history answer involves the English translations. The first New Testament translation into English was by Wycliffe, in 1395, who used debts and debtors in Matthew. In 1526, 150 years later, Tyndale used trespasses in Matthew's version of the prayer, as well as in the two following verses,

where trespasses actually appears. That became definitive, because the Anglican prayer book published just a couple of decades later, used that translation in the Lord's Prayer to be used in worship in the Church of England. The King James Version appeared in 1611 and went back to "debts," and it is that version that the Scottish Presbyterians used for their prayers. As a bonus, it allowed them to be different than the Church of England, which was always appealing to them.¹ There are complications and twists and turns, but that's essentially it. Some translators used the Latin as a source, and others went back to the Greek, and that accounts for some of the differences. Presbyterians have stubbornly—erm, persistently—held on to the "debts and debtors" as more accurate to the Scripture.

A side note, which you may be wondering at this point, is why the prayer that we say each week is longer and different than the version in either Matthew or Luke? The answer to that is that it comes from the Didache, an early Christian writing from the second century.²

So those are the short answers to why we say debts and debtors. Accurate translation. History. But what difference does it make? Is this a tradition worth hanging onto? Does it make us weird? Among other things, yes, it makes us weird, but I don't think that's a bad thing. What debts and debtors preserves is a connection to actual financial debts. The Old Testament passage that Etta read, among other passages in the law, was concerned about the economic and personal effects of people being in debt. They arranged that those debts would be forgiven every seven years. The debts and debtors of the prayer calls back to that Old Testament law and the grace that provoked it. Jesus was way way more comfortable than we are talking about money. Jesus was most often found taking the side of the poor, those who are most likely to have financial debts. Think of the turning over the tables in the Temple episode—that was partly on behalf of the poor.

Sticking with debts and debtors keeps that financial theme in our minds, one we might prefer to forget. All the while, we know that of course it also was meant figuratively, to mean sin. But when we speak just of sins and those who sin against us, I suspect that monetary debts don't pop into our minds very often. Same for trespasses. It's clear that debts and trespasses and sins were all overlapping ideas and concepts, so none of those traditions are wrong. They each tell us something just a little bit different, a different nuance, a different shade to the idea, a different kind of forgiveness.

I think we'll stick with debts and debtors, but if you want to say something different, that's ok, too. We may end up like my grandmother's Thanksgiving table, which I've always thought of as a glimpse of the heavenly banquet.

¹ This paragraph uses information found here:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Lord%27s_Prayer_in_English

² <http://www.didache.com/didache-and-lords-prayer-1/>