

Recently, when I was leading the Lord's Prayer in worship, I said, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." The two churches where I previously served use those words, and I slipped back into old habit. Indeed if you look at the Service for the Lord's Day in the front of our hymnal, you will see the words "sins" and "sin" used in the Lord's Prayer. When I apologized for my slip up, folks said, "Well, teach us about that." I love that about this church.

I remember once before a memorial service I was conducting, I went to check with the guest organist. She was playing that remarkable way organists do, turning pages, switching books, working fingers and feet, talking and nodding all at the same time. When I shared that the soloist would be singing the Lord's Prayer, without looking up or missing a note, she asked, "Methodist or Presbyterian?"

What is the difference, and what difference does it make? Well, there is the urban legend and then the more accurate story.

The urban legend goes like this: The Scots were merchants, and the English were landowners. To sin against a Scot meant that you had not paid your debts, so Presbyterians and others within the Reformed tradition preferred having their "debts" forgiven. On the other hand, the English, being landowners, believed that the chief sin was trespassing on their property, thus their preference was for the forgiveness of "trespasses." It is a nice story, but it is only a legend.

The more reliable explanation has to do with history and tradition and more specifically a difference in translation. When Thomas Cranmer wrote the Book of Common Prayer, the prime liturgical source for Anglicans, Episcopalians, and Methodists, he followed Tyndale's version of the Lord's Prayer, which translates the Greek word as "trespasses." The Scots, on the other hand, followed the King James Version, which they say translates the word used in the prayer by Jesus as "debts." And thus the difference has been passed down all the way to us.

Today, just as we no longer use the Old English words "thee," "thou," "wilt," and "shalt," we seek to pray in words that reflect accurately what Jesus is saying. And what Jesus is literally telling us to do is pray, "Forgive us for our sins the way we are forgiving others of theirs." However we translate the word from the Greek, we can know it means we have committed wrongs, we are in need of forgiveness, and we need to forgive others.

During this period of transition, let's try sometimes the updated translation and ask God to "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Call it debts, trespasses, or sins, there are a lot of ways we commit wrongs for which we need forgiveness. May we seek that forgiveness, and may we practice it toward others.

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