

## Debts or Trespasses?

Sermon by Rev. Norman M. Slaughter on the Fifth Petition of the Lord's Prayer delivered on Jan. 30, 1949

*"Here in St. Matthew's Church we perpetuate the actual wording of St. Matthew's Gospel."*

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At its meeting of October 20, 1897, the Kirk-Session agreed to ask the Congregation to "audibly recite the Lord's Prayer with the Minister as a part of the Order of Public Worship," also the word "Amen" at the close of the usual prayers.

In announcing this decision to the Congregation on the following Sunday, Rev. Thomas Fowler, who was then our minister, referring to the form of the Lord's Prayer in which the word *trespasses* is used rather than *debts*, said that "since this is St. Matthew's Church, we shall follow the form in the Gospel according to St. Matthew." Accordingly, the historic occasion of the introduction of the Lord's Prayer into the Order of Worship is honored in perpetuity by adherence to the form as found in Matthew VI: 9–13, King James Version.

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Text: Matthew 6.12. "And forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors."

### Debts and Trespasses

1. We cannot do God's work without the supply of our physical and spiritual needs — therefore the last prayer was offered. And equally we cannot do God's work unless we are at peace with Him — therefore this prayer follows. It is notable that this is the only petition in the Lord's Prayer upon which further comment is made by Jesus — "for if ye forgive men their trespasses your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." But before we proceed to a consideration of the full meaning of these words and how we can implement them, let us settle the matter of which word we are going to use. Our text and the further quotation I have given both come from Matthew's Gospel. Luke on the other hand has this — "And forgive us our sins for we ourselves also forgive everyone that is indebted to us." Three different words then are used in this same connection — debts, trespasses, and sins. Is there any real difference between them? If so, which one shall we use and why? I would go so far as to say that none of them is perfectly clear in meaning to users of 20<sup>th</sup> century English, the third one probably least of all. For us, debts refer almost invariably to monetary transactions and even the phrase "debt of honour" is becoming steadily less common, though whether that is due to a diminution of the indebtedness or of the honour I could not say, trespasses appears to refer to a legal misdemeanor of walking on land belonging to someone else (e.g., the common English sign-board 'Trespassers will be prosecuted' and 'sins' though sometimes used as a general 'cover-all' for things that sound less pleasant when specified, is fast becoming a theological term that is abandoned

to the experts. Once again, our literal-mindedness is at fault, together with an obstinate refusal to use what intelligence we have got in unravelling matters spiritual. In liturgical usage, i.e. in using the Prayer in Public Worship, practice varies between debts and trespasses, with a preponderance in favour of the latter word, mainly owing to its inclusion in the Book of Common Prayer in current use, though earlier Prayer Books have had the word 'debts'. Here in St. Matthew's Church we perpetuate the actual wording of St. Matthew's Gospel, and in so doing we are following the tradition of the Church of Scotland, with which our own congregation has had such close links in the past. The use of the word 'debt' is typically Jewish and is perhaps an illustration of the deep interest of members of that race in all ages in matters financial — it occurs commonly in the Gospels, in particular in one Parable which we shall consider in more detail in a few minutes. Clearly the important point for us is not so much a choice of words as a full realisation of the meaning of Jesus' words. In this connection it may well be that we shall decide in favour of the word 'debts' as being the most suggestive to us still of all that is involved. Consider it for a moment — in the first place it reminds us of the personal accountability to God into which we are brought by every act of sin. We can look at sin in many aspects — as the transgression of an ideal law, as a wrong done to our neighbour, or as a harm inflicted upon ourselves. But most solemn of all is the thought that sin makes us debtors before God, debtors who have wasted our Lord's money and are called to render account. In the second place, 'debts' reminds us of a class of sins which we are most apt to forget — our so-called 'sins of omission.' It is when we ask ourselves "How much owest thou unto thy Lord?" that the full extent of our falling short begins to appear. We may have striven hard and successfully against wrong-doing, but what of the things we have left undone? In Christ's great picture of the Judgement 'Inasmuch as ye did it not' is the preface to the sentence of condemnation. Let us settle then for the continued use of the word 'debts' as still being the best description of our state.

2. It is not my intention on this occasion to spend more time seeking to convince you of our state of indebtedness. That is something which must arise from our own self-examination, both of motives and conduct, a self-examination moreover which must be painfully and sincerely carried out in the light of our knowledge of God and His nature as revealed in Christ, and which must give full place to the pre-eminence of the Cross in our Christian faith. And may I add this one word — be tough with yourselves in that self-examination — remember those very extreme words of Jesus about the cutting off hand or foot as being preferable to a failure in this respect. I do not think there is much doubt what our conclusions will be if we make a thorough job of it — rather will we be appalled at our situation. It is only then that we are ready for this petition in the Prayer Our Lord has given us — "Forgive ... as we have forgiven." Surely our first reaction to this petition is one of great encouragement and uplifted hopes. In spite of our tremendous indebtedness, a fair implication of Jesus' words is that God will and does forgive, that he cancels the debt no matter how great. But first of all, a condition is laid down — "... as we have forgiven our debtors" — and note the past tense, describing something that has already been done. It is not "as we sometimes forgive others" nor is it "as we will consider doing to others at some remote future date", but something that has been completed already, and something too that is completely within our power to do. Jesus'

parable of the Unforgiving Debtor shows what happens when these words are not fulfilled — you remember the story, how there was a king who was owed by a servant of his a quite impossibly large sum of money, some millions of dollars. He begged the king for mercy. Given time, he declared, he would pay it all. The king generously cancelled the whole debt. Leaving the royal presence after this amazing act of generosity, the servant came upon a fellow-servant who owed him a trivial debt of a few dollars. In righteous indignation he laid hold on him — “Pay every penny”, he said. His fellow-servant begged for mercy in the very words he himself had just used to the king. But he refused to let him off and had him sent to prison. Such injustice astounds us, though I would go so far as to say that it is not without modern counterparts. Now listen to the sequel — the king heard what the man had done and sent for him — “You scoundrel of a servant! I discharged all that debt for you because you implored me. Ought you not to have had mercy on your fellow-servant as I had on you?” And in hot anger he handed him over to the torturers till he should pay him all the debt. And the words of Jesus in comment are “My Father will do the same to you unless you each forgive your brother from the heart.” You see what had happened? The tragedy of it was that his own debt had rolled back upon him, because he in his turn has behaved unforgivingly, unmercifully, towards his fellow. One summary of this must be that God deals with us as we deal with our fellow-men, and if we want to know how the face of God looks towards us, we must examine ourselves to see what is the aspect we present towards them. And remember that this parable was uttered by Jesus in answer to Peter’s question as to the number of times he should forgive the brother who had sinned against him, and remember that the answer given was, in effect, continually, just as often as it was necessary. It may well be that we feel that we have no occasion to extend this act of forgiveness towards another because none has given us occasion of offence. If that is so, well — yet I know full well that the harmony of our relations with others is often marred if not actually destroyed by some grudge or other that lingers on in our minds even though our outward attitude towards them is all friendliness. It is not only the extreme cases that come under the scope of this petition, but every detail of jealousy and hard feelings, not only our reaction to a deliberate hurt but also our response to that in their personalities which jars upon us. H.L. Gee tells in his inimitable way of the two old men, Jonathan and Mark, who for years had attended the same village chapel, and who for nine months had been at daggers drawn because Mark had said in a prayer-meeting that Jonathan was too long-winded. And so they had sat on opposite sides of the little chapel with hatred for each other in their hearts — until the Watch-night service that was to herald in a New Year. It was conducted by an old local preacher and after the Scripture reading and his brief address came this prayer — “Come, Jesus, into our midst, come with all thy wondrous power, come to guide us and protect us, to comfort us and inspire us. Come, Lord Jesus, to walk and talk with us. That Thou wilt surely come we know, for thou has said ‘Where two or three are gathered together ... Beg pardon, Lord. The door won’t open? Then push, Lord, push. Met in Thy name, eh? With the mind that was in Thee and with hearts overflowing with love for thee and for each other — each other, Lord? Seeking thy forgiveness because they have forgiven each other? Canst push the door open now, Lord? Hallelujah, Thou canst for Brother Mark has forgiven Brother Jonathan and Brother Jonathan hath now nothing against Brother Mark and the old year is dying and a new spirit is being born ...” but he got no further, for Mark had stood up and cried out “Lord, forgive me”, whereupon

Jonathan got up and cried “Nay, Lord, forgive me”, and tears streaming down his rugged face advanced with outstretched hand towards Mark who turned and went towards him. I shall never forget, writes H.L. Gee. seeing those two veterans sharing one hymn-book for the next hymn and after, walking arm in arm down the Chapel steps. “Forgive ... as we have forgiven.” That is something more than a touching story to round off a sermon. We need have no fear of the face of God’s forgiveness of us, whether it be debts or trespasses or sins that we call on Him to cancel, what we do need to be concerned about is whether we have first fulfilled the condition that must precede that cancellation. Have you aught in your heart against another? Go, first be reconciled to your brother and then come to God’s Altar and find the reality of His forgiveness of you.