

*“Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who have sinned against us.”*

THE GOLDEN RULE IN REVERSE

--So, you're at a gathering with Christians from other churches, and as the time together comes to a meaningful close, it is decided to pray the Lord's Prayer. What better way to evidence our oneness under Christ? After all, if you're with a bunch of Christians, you can be sure that everyone knows it and that everyone can recite it.

Without a moment's thought, you're off to a great beginning! *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.* Just listen to all those voices in unison!

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. No doubt about it-- you've got them all with you!

Give us this day our daily bread. Yeah, now you're really on a roll . . . until you come to the next line, which unavoidably ends up being a real klunker.

And forgive us our sins / trespasses / debts, as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us / trespassed against us / our debtors.

Ever had one of those awkward moments, as everyone sort of holds their breath until they have stumbled through that lumpy, tower-of-Babel line. I have. Typically I get quiet right about there in the prayer, until I can hear whether it's the sin, the trespass, or the debt-party which prevails locally, and then I join them with that wording. One can be sure that, if it's a mixed group of Christians, you just never know which version is going to carry the day.

--Virtually everything else in the Lord's Prayer seems pretty uniform. How, then, in our history does this line get so tangled up?

In order to gain some insight into that, we need to head back to the original two versions of the grand old prayer as we find it in its gospel predecessors. Fathoming the Greek, the language in which the entire New Testament is written, we find that Jesus in Matthew's account, at this pivotal place in the prayer, uses one Greek noun (*“opheila'mata”*), while Jesus in Luke's account uses a completely different Greek noun (*“hamarti'as”*). Hmmm. In Matthew, the word Jesus is said to use speaks of being indebted, of owing a bond, of being under obligation, all of which have a notable banking or lending flavor to them--by extension suggesting sin to be a matter of delinquency or default. By comparison, in Luke, the word that Jesus is cited as using means literally to miss the mark, to be in error, to be guilty of some wrong--by extension suggesting that sin is, not a matter of default or delinquency, but of a deviating from the virtuous path. So much for uniformity.

A very word-for-word reading of Matthew would go something like: “And forgive us the debts that are ours as indeed we forgave those who were indebted to us.” Comparing that to an equally word-for-word reading of Luke, we get something like: “And forgive us for the sins (or offences) that are ours, for indeed we ourselves forgive everyone who owes (or is indebted to) us.”

I know, it's all Greek to you!

--In any case, however you prefer to say it, every time we ramble through this section of the Lord's Prayer, at

the core of it is actually a rather disturbing request that we make of God. It is another of those things that we witlessly say in every recitation that we don't realize we're saying when we say it. In spending all this tedious attention to the line-by-line details of this prayer, we are trying to lift the veil on just that sort of unconsciousness. As we do so, here, there is a sobering bit of unpleasantness to be reckoned with.

It has to do with what sounds a lot like a reversal of the so-called Golden Rule. You know what the Golden Rule is: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It is so fundamental a religious truth that it exists in pretty much the same words in every major world religion. Here, in the Lord's Prayer, however, we've got that rule standing on its head, as instead we beseech God to do unto us as we have done unto others.

Sticking with the "sin"-party version, since it's the one that we of St. John's are inclined to use, listen again to this line: "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who have sinned against us." Hello! Wake up, pray-ers! In effect, we are saying: God, if You have any question as to how You should treat us, we would ask You to take Your cue from this--Regard us precisely as we have shown regard for one another. We would ask You, please, to behave toward us exactly as we have behaved toward others.

So, God, if we specifically have been kind and generous, patient and understanding, tolerant and accepting of others, then, in giving us our just reward--whether in this life or in the next--deal with us with unmitigated kindness and generosity, endless patience and understanding, infinite tolerance and acceptance. Sounds great!

However, left unsaid--heck, left even un-thought--is the corollary: And if we haven't been any of those things (and, let's be honest, much of the time we haven't!), then, God, by all means deal with us just as unsympathetically and harshly as we have been unsympathetic and harsh. Ouch!

Let those of us who would mumble through the Lord's Prayer on automatic pilot beware! Given the crass and crude manners that we sometimes live out our lives, every time we reiterate the Lord's Prayer, we give God permission--no, stronger than that!--we encourage God to deal with us in precisely the manners that we would prefer not to be dealt with. That's right, essentially we are requesting of God that a pox be upon us! Clearly, we need to be very conscious about what we are praying for here, and if we're going to go on saying it and truly meaning it, then we need to put our lives with others in better order!

--I told you at the outset of this series of Lenten messages that there are some things in this beloved old prayer that we would just as soon not know. This is one of those, which underscores the point of what Jesus says in this morning reading: "The measure you give will be the measure you get back" (6.38b). The guidance is pretty straightforward and obvious: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you" (6.37).

In a world predicated on fairness and justice, that is both fair and just--though it certainly does violate our naive hope that we can live lives of mean-spirited selfishness with impunity and still have God receive us at the Pearly Gates with mercy and generosity. This line in the prayer suggests that that's not likely--especially, I should think, not after we, ten thousand times, have asked God, please, to receive us just like, over our years, we have received others. No doubt, that naiveté is a balloon that deserves to be popped, if we are ever to change our ways in plenty of time to be benefited, and not condemned, by that for which we pray in this line of the Lord's Prayer.

Truly, I am grieved to be the one this day to bring you such bad tidings. I told you, way back in week #1 of these considerations, that I would just as soon deal with other subjects through this season. I like you, and I hate being the "great disturber" like this.

That said, looking forward, in the interest of full transparency, if you feel stirred up and even agitated by this

line in the Lord's Prayer, just wait until next week.

I'm just saying.