

**Forgive Us Our Debts**  
Leviticus 25:8-13  
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In our worship this autumn, we have been exploring the Lord's Prayer, taking it line by line and considering the various meanings and applications of its words and phrases. Today we arrive at the petition "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

As background for understanding what Jesus was talking about when he referred to debts, I've chosen for our scripture lesson today a passage from the Book of Leviticus. Hear now the Word of the Lord.

Leviticus 25:8-13

You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the day of atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces. In this year of jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property.

For the Word of God in scripture,  
For the Word of God among us,  
For the Word of God within us,  
**Thanks be to God.**

Back in July of 2010 on my second Sunday as your pastor, I made a mistake in worship. As I was leading the Lord's Prayer I said "trespasses" instead of "debts." Afterwards Val Himes asked me, "Are we going to be saying 'trespasses' now?" I assured her we weren't, and fortuitously the lectionary provided the Lord's Prayer as the Gospel text a few weeks after that, so I got to discuss my mistake.

The Lord's Prayer is familiar to any of us who grew up in a Christian church, but it is likely that we memorized slightly different versions. There are even two different versions in the Gospels, one in Matthew and one in Luke. But various denominations also have their preferred translations. Some folks don't say the final lines at all, "For thine is the kingdom, and

the power, and the glory forever.” While others make the ending even longer with “forever and ever.”

These variations are rarely matters that affect the basic substance of the prayer, except for the line that is our focus for today. Depending on which translation you read or which church you attend, you will be praying for forgiveness from sins, trespasses, or debts. And while there are clear overlaps of meaning in the use of those words, there are also distinct differences of substance, particularly when we come to debts.

Our liturgist earlier read the parable of Jesus about the Pharisee and the tax collector. The one arrogant and the other contrite and penitent. The theologian Timothy Bradshaw points out how this story “powerfully exemplifies the call for wholehearted and honest repentance in the eyes of God.” The story suggests that God desires our “honesty and genuineness of heart” in prayer in order to cultivate a personal relationship.

So, when we come to this line of the prayer, we are being honest with ourselves and with God about our human condition and about our own failings. We take responsibility, and we seek to restore broken and damaged relationships. This petition affirms that personal relationships are at the heart of human life.

Now some think the petition works as a quid pro quo—you won’t be forgiven until you first forgive. That transactional way of understanding it misses the broader perspective on authentic personhood and the value of relationships. Rather, we are to cultivate an overall approach to the world that is gracious, merciful, and forgiving. Oscar Cullman explains it this way, “We can ask for God’s forgiveness only if while praying we are ourselves in the realm of forgiveness that [God] wills. We must know that God’s forgiveness is not some property, but belongs to [God’s] inmost being, [God’s] infinite love.”

God forgives us out of a free act of grace—a gift—not something we earn by our own actions. But if we expect to receive grace and never pass it along to other people, that’s not how grace works.

Because we are secure in the belief that God extends grace toward us, we are then freed to extend grace to others. We are secure in forgiving others, aware that our own value, worth, and integrity rests in our identity as God’s beloved children.

Timothy Bradshaw summarizes this attitude: “Praying for forgiveness in a positive sense is realigning our life with the generous outreaching movement of God into the darkness of the world.” We are joining up with God’s generous, gracious love of the world in an attempt to heal its brokenness.

These sorts of spiritual ideas, then, are part of this petition, regardless of which word we use, though the word “sins” maybe best express these ideas.

“Trespasses” is an interesting and somewhat old-fashioned concept. It contains a particular perspective on sin—that when we sin we have crossed a boundary that we should have respected. The idea compels us to consider what rules we have broken, what limits and lines we have crossed, what standards we have violated, and particularly where we have disrespected the personhood of others. How have our actions violated other’s dignity, integrity, and worth?

And then the return. How have others disrespected us, violated our boundaries, harmed our personhood?

The focus is on setting right our personal violations and reinforcing our boundaries which others have crossed. There are times in our lives when this perspective is a particularly valuable way of praying.

What about “debts?” We in the Reformed Protestant tradition have generally preferred to pray the prayer with these words. Now many people simply think of ‘debts’ as another old-fashioned way of talking about sins, similar to ‘trespasses’ in that regard. But debts has a completely different layer of meaning and it ties back to the Leviticus passage I opened with.

In the Levitical law there is this provision for the year of Jubilee. Every fifty years the Hebrews were supposed to celebrate this special, holy year, and during that year there were four actions that were to be taken by society: 1) the fields were to be left fallow, 2) all outstanding debts were to be forgiven, 3) slaves were to be set free, and 4) every family that had lost its land was to be restored to it.

This is a radical, economic vision for society. In essence it meant that every fifty years society would be reset and everyone would have a fresh start.

Jesus seems to have been deeply influenced by this tradition of the Jubilee. When he stood up to preach in the synagogue at Nazareth and proclaimed that “this is the year of the Lord’s favor,” he was probably proclaiming the Jubilee. And throughout his teaching he emphasizes these social and economic principles.

What seems to be the case for Jesus is that he wants to reorder human society so that these principles are more a part of every year of human life and not just a once in a generation fresh start. He wants a society where people are set free, where they are not burdened by debt, where everyone has the opportunity to provide for themselves.

We know that first century Palestine suffered under the weight of great debt. The taxes of Herod the Great and the Roman empire had become a burden upon the people. Many of the peasantry had lost their own land and were now working and living as tenant farmers on the property of wealthier people. Many were still weighed down by the burdens of the debts they had taken on and what they owed to the government. This is the context for many of the parables of Jesus.

In the midst of this economic and social crisis, which led to banditry and ultimately insurrection, Jesus came preaching a more humane and egalitarian society developed along the great ideals of the Hebrew tradition.

“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” is not simply about setting right our personal failings, as good as that teaching might be. The prayer is asking for a reordering of human society. And we who pray it are committing ourselves to become part of this movement. This is one of the practical ways in which “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” is fulfilled. God’s kingdom comes when human society is set right. And that begins with forgiving our debts and starting fresh, as in the Jubilee.

Now, what can we make of that in 2019? Our modern economy runs on credit and debt. Jesus’ vision is an even more radical reordering of our economy than it was of the ancient one.

At its simplest, we as Christians should work for an economy that is more humane and more egalitarian, because that's the kind of society God wants. That, at least, means opposing exploitation, conspicuous consumption, inequality, and environmental degradation. That, at least, means living more simply, more sustainably, more generously.

But there's more we can do.

If you've been following the United Church of Christ news, you probably were excited by what happened in Chicago at the end of October. Trinity United Church of Christ, in coordination with the national setting of the UCC, this summer raised \$38,000 and with that was able to buy \$5.3 million dollars of medical debt. Now, I don't really understand how debt gets turned into securities that one can purchase for such small amounts, but that's what happens. They bought the debt of almost 6,000 families in only three zip codes. And what did they do once they bought that debt? Well, they didn't hire a collection agency, they forgave it.

We aren't the only Christians forgiving debts. Earlier this year the Assemblies of God Grand Rapids First Church of Wyoming, Michigan was able, with only \$15,000, to buy \$1.8 million of debt, which they forgave, helping 2,000 families in western Michigan.

This is now becoming a movement, and the United Church of Christ is going to make forgiving medical debt a major initiative of the denomination. On this coming December 3 the UCC will raise money specifically for that purpose. And they are inviting churches and other entities to partner in this effort.

The Rev. Patrick Duggan, Executive Director of the UCC Building and Loan Fund, wrote in a commentary this week that 52% of all debt is medical debt. Unlike in the time of Jesus, when taxes were burdening people, in our time medical debt is one of the leading causes of poverty and inequality. So, as followers of Jesus we are called to help solve that problem. Rev. Duggan proclaimed: "Alleviating medical debt has the multiplier effect of improving many elements of basic living for millions of families that struggle to make a living. It hits at the core of a major cause of poverty in the United States. Ending poverty in all forms is the core mission of Jesus Christ and is the heart of the mission of the United Church of Christ, a just world for all."

So, let's join up with God's generous, gracious love of the world in an attempt to heal its brokenness. Let's take responsibility for our own actions and seek to restore damaged relationships. Let's be a more humane and egalitarian society.

And we commit ourselves to such things, when we pray as Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."