

2018 07 22 – Forgive Us Our Debts

Deuteronomy 15:1-18

How many of you have ever been in debt? How many of you have at some point in your life taken out a loan or even purchased an item using a credit card? (*wait for a response*) Yes, it's safe to say that nearly everyone in this room has experienced debt. In fact, debt has become a way of life in our western economy. I found a recent article on the Bank of Canada website that stated, "In Canada's case, household debt is around 170 per cent of disposable income. In other words, the average Canadian owes about \$1.70 for every dollar of income he or she earns per year, after taxes." <https://www.bankofcanada.ca/2018/05/canada-economy-household-debt-how-big-the-problem/>

What would happen to our economy if every seven years all of our debts were forgiven? Imagine what would happen to our banks and other financial institutions, what the impact would be on our capital market! It wouldn't work would it?

But that was the law that was written in the book of Deuteronomy. That was law that the Israelites were supposed to live by. That was the law that Jesus grew up with. You see things were different 2000 or more years ago. When these laws were written, people lived lives based on subsistence farming and fishing. Loans were rare - usually given out only when someone was destitute and needed funds for survival. As Fran read from Deuteronomy this morning, " There will

always be those among us in the world who are in need, so I require of you that you be always generous with the poor and needy in your land.” A loan was a form of charity and no one was expected to spend their whole lives paying it back ... seven years was the maximum and then they were forgiven. Even indentured workers, people who were basically working for free in order to pay off a debt, had to be let go after seven years of slavery.

When Jesus told his disciples to pray “Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors,” he was probably referring to this law from his own Hebrew scriptures. Dominic Crossan, a well-known biblical scholar, argues that this line in Matthew’s version of the Jesus prayer should be taken literally, not figuratively (*The Greatest Prayer*, page 154). But if we do that what are the literal debts that we are asking God to forgive? What is it that God has loaned to us? There are so many things that we could name including life itself. But really the most obvious thing that God has given us on loan is this world in which we live. We have been put on earth as stewards of God’s creation and we owe it to God to run God’s world responsibly. To care for God’s creation and to make sure that everyone and everything has what it needs. So when we pray the words, “Forgive us our debts,” we could be asking God to forgive us for all the times that we have failed in that task.

But how many of us take these words literally? In fact, how many of us even pray this prayer using the words from the gospel of Matthew? The traditional version, the one that we learned when we were children, goes like this: “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” It just kind

slides off the tongue, doesn't it? So where did that version come from? Why has it become so popular?

Well, we don't have to look far to find an answer to that question. You see, even the author of the Gospel of Matthew, thought that Jesus' prayer, as it was written, needed some further interpretation. In the next verse, he wrote, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you..." There it is, the introduction of another understanding of that line. In this verse the author has used a different Greek word, one that moves away from debt and speaks more directly of ethical transgressions, the kind of wrongdoings that biblical scholars have translated as "trespasses."

The author of the Gospel of Matthew, left the prayer as it was and put this additional interpretation at the end, but in the Gospel of Luke we find a more direct technique. This author changed the original prayer by writing, "and forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." So in Luke we find both ideas: the forgiveness of wrongdoing or sins and the forgiveness of debt.

What would it mean for us, if we were to take both of these ideas together, if we were to pray that God forgive our debts and our sins as we forgive the debts owed to us and forgive those who have sinned against us? What if we were to consider the interaction between these two acts of forgiveness? When does debt become sinful and when do sinful acts create debt?

No matter which interpretation we use, the common thread in this part of the Lord's Prayer is forgiveness, God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others. The key assumption in this prayer is that we will forgive the trespasses, the sins and the debts of everyone else, in fact, it is written as a *fait accompli*, an accomplished fact: "as we also have forgiven our debtors."

Obviously the author of the gospel of Matthew, wasn't totally comfortable with that assumption so he decided to emphasize our side of this equation. He wrote, "For 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." Whoa there! He definitely went a little too far with that interpretation. If there is one thing we understand about God, it is that God's grace is unconditional. God forgives us whether we deserve it or not. If we don't repent and change our ways, we may not know or appreciate God's grace, but it is there no matter what. God's mercy cannot be earned.

That being said, it is still important for us to forgive. Not because God requires it, but because we do. Forgiveness is not easy; but it is necessary. It is necessary for our own health, our own happiness and our own freedom. When we forgive others then we free ourselves from the burden of anger or the need for revenge. As Mahatma Ghandi said, "The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong." May we all know the blessing of being forgiven and the joy of forgiving those who have trespassed against us."

MV #95 "How Deep the Peace" (sung twice)