



Westminster Presbyterian Church  
1200 Marquette Avenue  
Minneapolis, MN 55403  
(612) 332-3421  
[www.westminstermpls.org](http://www.westminstermpls.org)

*The Prayer Jesus Taught:*

*"And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."*

Tim Hart-Andersen

Sunday, March 19, 2023

*Leviticus 25:8-12; 35-41*

*And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*

Along the way in this sermon series on the prayer Jesus taught I've heard from several of you eager to get to this particular petition. I have been eager, too. I'm glad we're finally here. Of all the lines in the prayer Jesus taught, this one differs most in its wording among various Christian traditions, which can lead to a variety of interpretations.

What was Jesus teaching here?

Some of you probably grew up as *trespassers* and some as *sinners*. Others of us have been proud *debtors* since

childhood. Someone approached me a few weeks ago hoping to settle this once and for all with their spouse. I like that their talking about the prayer at home. *What is the correct wording?* they pleaded.

It's complicated - and, lest we forget, the Apostle Paul reminds us that "All...have fallen short of the glory of God.... There is no one" - debtor, sinner, trespasser - "who is righteous, not even one." (Romans 3:23, 10)

On that basis we could conclude that it's of no consequence which wording we use; in the end, we all miss the mark, whatever the mark might be. But there's more to the story. The different words we use come from the gospels themselves and from church tradition. The language we use matters, as we have seen in this series

This Friday as part of the Westminster Performing Arts Series, the Rev. Linda Loving will present a one-woman

show on *Julian of Norwich*. Julian was a medieval mystic born in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century. She sealed herself into a cell in the wall of the church in Norwich and communicated with the world for the rest of her life only through an open window. In her visions – her “showings” – Julian pushed the church’s language in directions that echo our exploration of the prayer Jesus taught. “Just as God is our Father,” Julian said, “So God is also our Mother.”

One of the points in this series on the prayer Jesus taught is that language evolves. In that sense it is living. We should guard against the calcification of the vocabulary of our faith. Our spiritual practices – no matter the particular wording – always want to reflect the dynamic interaction with God that Jesus longs for us to have. And the words *do* matter.

*And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*

The prayer Jesus taught appears only in two gospels, each with its own version of this line. In *Luke* Jesus teaches, “And forgive us our *sins*, for we ourselves forgive everyone *indebted* to us.” In *Matthew*, on the other hand, he makes no mention of sin: “And forgive us our *debts* as we forgive our *debtors*” – the version we pray at Westminster. (Luke 11:4; Matthew 6:12)

This is not a matter of a typo or confusion about someone’s handwriting. The Greek words here are quite distinct: “debt” is *opheiléma*, while “sin” is *hamartia*. The gospels writers chose their vocabulary with intention, leaving us to sort it out.

To add to the puzzle, the Greek word for *trespass* does not appear in either gospel version of the prayer Jesus taught, although it does show up later. *Trespass* makes its debut in the first full English translation of the Bible in 1526, done by William Tyndale, who got into trouble for doing it and

eventually was deemed a heretic and executed in 1536. Tyndale's Bible became widely popular and influenced the way English-speakers said the prayer Jesus taught.

To this day, many Episcopalians, Methodists, Lutherans, Catholics, and others use *trespasses*.

The King James version, published almost a century after Tyndale, shifted back to the original Greek and used *debt* and *debtors*, and that's where the Presbyterians landed and have been ever since.

*And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*

This is not random use of language. Jesus prays debts and debtors for a reason. In doing so, he intentionally introduces economic language into the prayer. When Jesus teaches about hunger in the prayer – *give us this day our daily bread* – he's reminding us that *people need to eat*. Now

when he speaks of economics, he's reminding us another basic truth: that debt – not metaphorical or spiritualized indebtedness but *simply not having enough money* – can crush and impoverish people.

In our culture debt is a given for most of us. Capitalism is sustained by debt. Westminster gets this. We're working hard right now in a campaign to pay off the congregation's debt. As one Westminster member said, "Forgive us our debt, so we can pursue our mission." If only the lenders were listening!

When we substitute "sins" for "debts" we miss the specific kind of forgiveness Jesus is aiming at here. *Debt* is unequivocally an economic term. *Sin* is a theological word. If we use *sin*, the wording seems directed to our private, individual behavior, as if Jesus were referring to *my* moral failings for which I need forgiveness, or *my* need to forgive wrongs done to *me*. That makes forgiveness a

matter of letting go of personal offenses or owning up to my own immorality- which may be good to do, but it is not what Jesus is after here.

And *trespassing* has to do with crossing boundaries - a *transgression* that violates someone else's property, which was a problem in 16<sup>th</sup> century England when Tyndale decided to employ that word.

The language used by Jesus in the prayer as taught in Matthew, is concerned neither with property nor sin. It's carefully intended to point toward economic realities.

*And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*

By using this terminology, Jesus is taking forgiveness into the realm of systemic economic justice, which concerns the collective, rather than the individual. The prayer Jesus taught draws on a long tradition in Judaism of the hope

for a Year of Jubilee. “You shall count off...seven times seven years,” Leviticus says,

“So that the period of seven...years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud...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.” (Leviticus 25:8-11)

It's an old dream, and the prophets of Israel never give up on it as a possibility, and neither should we. Isaiah speaks of Jubilee when he says,

“The spirit of...God is upon me, because...God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor.” (Isaiah 61:1-2)



In her book *Church in the Round*, Letty Russell says the prophet's vision here announces, "that memory of God's future is already happening as the oppressed are set at liberty and the jubilee year arrives." (Letty Russell, *Church in the Round* [Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993], p. 81)

*The memory of God's future is already happening, as Jubilee arrives.*

That Jubilee vision gives rise to the incarnation. Jesus quotes the same lines from Isaiah when he preaches in his home synagogue at the start of his ministry. It nearly gets him killed because Jubilee threatens the existing economic order and promises to change the way we live by upending the existing economic order.

"For it is a Jubilee; it shall be holy to you...If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them...You shall not lend

them your money at interest taken in advance or provide them food at a profit. I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt.”  
(Leviticus 25:12, 35, 37-38)

The Year of Jubilee as understood by the ancient Hebrew people and carried forward by the prophets of Israel and then enfolded in the person of Jesus Christ, is to be the season when God’s intentions for human community are realized.

“If any who are dependent on you become so impoverished that they sell themselves to you, you shall not make them serve as enslaved people. They shall remain with you as hired...laborers. They shall serve with you until the year of the Jubilee. Then they and their children with them shall...go back to their own family.” (Leviticus 25:39-41)

Jubilee repairs the world. It offers a way for justice to be done, for relationships to be restored, for the broken places in society to be healed, for economic inequities to be eased. *The prayer Jesus taught is a Jubilee prayer.* It is a prayer for our time, especially in America, one of the wealthiest nations on the planet, “that devotes far fewer resources” to the reduction of poverty “as a share of its gross national product than other rich democracies.”

(Matthew Desmond, *America Is in a Disgraced Class of its Own*; NYTimes, March 16, 2023)

Princeton professor Matthew Desmond says,

“Poverty is chronic pain, on top of tooth rot, on top of debt collector harassment, on top of the nauseating fear of eviction. It is the suffocation of your talents and your dreams. It is death come early and often.”

*And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*

The federal hourly minimum wage is \$7.25, just over \$15,000 a year, and that number has not changed since 2009. Minnesota's minimum wage is \$10.59 for large employers, which equates to slightly more than \$22,000 a year. Today in our nation, 38 million people live below the poverty line, which is \$26,500 a year. To pay rent and other bills, to purchase food, to support children, to pay for transportation – *merely to survive*, day after day, people go into debt, and that debt then holds them captive.

During the pandemic, in what became an unintentional experiment, the federal government expanded the Child Tax Credit and in six months child poverty was cut in half, to the lowest level in 50 years. *In only six months*. And with the monthly infusion of cash support for families during the pandemic, food insecurity was the lowest it has been in 20 years. Banks reported that their lowest income customers had a 50% increase in their account balances

from before the pandemic.

(<https://www.vox.com/2022/9/14/23352022/child-poverty-covid-tax-credit>)

We know how to do this.

“The hard part isn’t designing effective antipoverty programs or figuring out how to pay for them,” Professor Desmond says. “The hard part is ending our addiction to poverty.”

In the prayer Jesus taught he’s inviting us to imagine the Jubilee, where a resetting of economic priorities and a realignment of relationships takes place, and encumbered people are freed, land taken returned, crushing debts forgiven, and equity within the community begins to be re-established.

The prayer, especially with its economic implications, confirms Isaiah’s hope long ago, that someday we might

be called “repairers of the breach, restorers of streets to live in.” (Isaiah 58:12b)

*And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*

This line we pray so casually week after week is a summons to get serious, to get serious about undoing the harm inflicted by economic realities in our land on the most vulnerable among us. The prayer Jesus taught commits us, as we pray it, to the work of dismantling the very real, unjust disparities that exist in our world.

There is scant evidence that the Year of Jubilee as imagined in Leviticus was ever fully implemented, but that doesn't mean we should stop praying for it.

In fact – and as far as I'm concerned this settles it – by using *debts* and *debtors* in the prayer Jesus taught, we are praying for the more just economic order that God envisions.

To God be the glory.

Amen.