

“Debt Forgiveness”

Deuteronomy 15

At the end of every seventh year, cancel all debts. This is the procedure: Everyone who has lent money to a neighbor writes it off. You must not press your neighbor or his brother for payment: All-Debts-Are-Canceled—God says so.

Matthew 6:9-13

“Pray, then, in this way: Our Father, who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Matthew 18:21-35

At that point Peter got up the nerve to ask, “Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?” Jesus replied, “Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven.

“The kingdom of God is like a king who decided to square accounts with his servants. As he got under way, one servant was brought before him who had run up a debt of a hundred thousand dollars. He couldn’t pay up, so the king ordered the man, along with his wife, children, and goods, to be auctioned off at the slave market.

“The poor wretch threw himself at the king’s feet and begged, ‘Give me a chance and I’ll pay it all back.’ Touched by his plea, the king let him off, erasing the debt.

“The servant was no sooner out of the room when he came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him ten dollars. He seized him by the throat and demanded, ‘Pay up. Now!’

“The poor wretch threw himself down and begged, ‘Give me a chance and I’ll pay it all back.’ But he wouldn’t do it. He had him arrested and put in jail until the debt was paid. When the other servants saw this going on, they were outraged and brought a detailed report to the king.

“The king summoned the man and said, ‘You evil servant! I forgave your entire debt when you begged me for mercy. Shouldn’t you be compelled to be merciful to your fellow servant who asked for mercy?’ The king was furious and put the screws to the man until he paid back his entire debt. And that’s exactly what my Father in heaven is going to do to each one of you who doesn’t forgive unconditionally anyone who asks for mercy.”

“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors...”

On August 24, President Biden released a plan to cancel \$10,000 of student debt for low-to-middle-income borrowers.

As could be expected, social media and the news shows lit up with all sorts of responses to the President’s Debt Forgiveness plan.

Some political leaders, who are angered by the President’s debt forgiveness plan, want to sue the President, claiming it is illegal. Some state political leaders want to tax the amount of debt forgiven, treating it as personal income.

Still others hail it as long over due for those struggling to pay off their student loan debts.

My friend, Eric Brehm, wrote this: **“I graduated from college with \$6,000 of student loans and paid them off in less than two years. In my opinion, the fact that others have received student loan forgiveness when I did not is FANTASTIC. "Good for them!" and not, "Damn it all, no one forgave MY student loans!"**

Another friend, Sherry Johnson Smith, who helped put her two sons through college wrote this response: **“Half of my personal paycheck for eight years went directly to college (IU) to help pay for my kids’ education. It was a sacrifice I willingly chose. We worked hard & assumed we were finally done paying tuition. I know many of you have similar stories. Now, it appears one debt will simply be transferred to another (to you and I). This plan doesn’t address the root of the problem, the increasing cost of a college education.”**

“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors...”

Eric and Sherry both make good points about student debt forgiveness and the rising cost of a college education.

According to an NPR article, ***“How The Cost of Higher Education Went From Affordable to Sky High,”*** - “After WWII, both states and the federal government began investing in higher education, supporting colleges and universities, with the GI Bill for veterans and then the National Defense Student Loan or Federal Perkins Loan program. This made the cost of college affordable.”

The landmark Higher Education Act of 1965 pushed for greater college access for women and minorities. Americans flocked to campuses with the expectation that the government was going to foot part of the bill, and college did become affordable for many more Americans.

All of that began to change in 1970, with double-digit inflation and a sputtering economy. College tuition and fees climbed as much or more than the inflation rate. Private loans, heavily subsidized by the federal government, gradually replaced federal grants as the main source of money for both poor and middle-class college students.

As family income fell, borrowing to pay for college took off, while public investment in higher education dropped. "So it's not that colleges are spending more money to educate students, it's that they have to get that money from someplace to replace their lost state funding — and that's from tuition and fees from students and families. (*NPR article, "How The Cost of Higher Education Went From Affordable to Sky High"*)

The official White House Press release offered these words on student debt: "The skyrocketing cumulative federal student loan debt—\$1.6 trillion and rising for more than 45 million borrowers—is a significant burden on America's middle class. Middle-class borrowers struggle with high monthly payments and ballooning balances that make it harder for them to build wealth, like buying homes, putting away money for retirement, and starting small businesses."

It goes on to add: "For the most vulnerable borrowers, the effects of debt are even more crushing. Nearly one-third of borrowers have debt but no degree, according to an analysis by the Department of Education of a recent cohort of undergraduates. Many of these students could not complete their degree because the cost of attendance was too high. About 16% of borrowers are in default – **including nearly a third of senior citizens with student debt** – which can result in the government garnishing a borrower's wages or lowering a borrower's credit score. The student debt burden also falls disproportionately on Black borrowers. Twenty years after first enrolling in school, the typical Black borrower who started college in the 1995-96 school year still owed 95% of their original student debt."

"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors..."

Of course, student debt is not the only debt concern.

According to TamseySolutions.com, The total personal debt in the U.S. is at an all-time high of \$14.96 trillion.

The average American debt (per U.S. adult) is \$58,604 and 77% of American households have at least some type of debt. How many of us have debt?

"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors..."

Of all the debt Americans owe, Medical Debt is perhaps the biggest concern.

According to Peterson-KFF Health System Tracker: **“23 million people (nearly 1 in 10 adults) owe significant medical debt. The SIPP survey suggests people in the United States owe at least \$195 billion in medical debt. Approximately 16 million people (6% of adults) in the U.S. owe over \$1,000 in medical debt and 3 million people (1% of adults) owe medical debt of more than \$10,000. Medical debt occurs across demographic groups. But, people with disabilities, those in worse health, and poor or near-poor adults are more likely to owe significant medical debt. We also find that Black Americans, and people living in the South or in Medicaid non-expansion states were more likely to have significant medical debt...People with cancer have more medical debt than those who have never had cancer.”**

“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors...”

Between the staggering amount of student loans, medical bills, and personal liabilities, Americans have a lot of debt.

Do we have it in us as a nation to forgive our staggering debt, be it student loans, medical liabilities or other forms of debt?

As you ponder that question, let’s take a moment as followers of Christ, to reflect a bit on the words in the Lord’s Prayer that we pray each week, saying: **“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors....”**

Do you ever pause to think why Jesus used those words?

In her article, “Forgive Us Our Debts: The Economics of The Lord’s Prayer”, Marcia Pally writes: “What is it that we’re forgiving? As our various English translations have it, do we mean sins, trespasses, or debts? Debt covers both financial and non-financial owing, as in ‘mortgage debt’ and ‘debt of gratitude.’ Trespass points to property violations. (*The rich owned land, and the poor could not, so often when the poor sought land to raise crops, they were prosecuted for trespassing against the wealthy and powerful.*) Sin connotes violation of sacred commandments. What difference does it make to today’s notion of forgiveness and a discussion of debt forgiveness?”

Each of our scripture passages, and there are more Bible passages we could have read, deal with debt forgiveness.

Reading in Leviticus 25:1-13, we hear about the Year of Jubilee, which came every 50th year, when people were released from all their debts.

In Deuteronomy 15:1-3, which we read, we hear reference to the Sabbath laws (sh-mi-tah). These biblical laws require that after every six-year period, financial debts be relieved and the land lie fallow.

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, and he offered them the prayer formula we refer to as the Lord's Prayer, he used the petition: **"And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."**

The biblical bases for this petition of the Lord's Prayer was complete debt relief. While there was some unintended complications around loans to the poor which had to be addressed, as Marcia Pally notes, **"the shmitah (shame-tah) laws of debt relief remained an important moral principle. We see it reflected in Luke 11:4 and Matthew 6:12, in which what we forgive is derived from the Greek aphemi (ah-fee-a-me), which means to release or remit a debt, with both monetary and non-monetary connotations."**

In addition to economic implication of forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus also references this in the story he tells about the ungrateful servant who has a staggering amount of debt (\$100,000) owed to the government (king). Unable to pay his debt, the king orders him evicted from his home, and all his worldly possessions, along with his spouse and children, sold. Drowning in debt he can't repay, he begs for mercy. The king (government), shows him mercy, and forgives all his debt.

Forgive us our debts...we pray.

But then the one forgiven of their debt, turns around and demands payment of a much smaller debt owed him by a friend. When that person cannot pay even a small amount of debt, the one who was just released from his overwhelming amount of debt, shows no mercy.

That second part of the petition - **"as we forgive our debtors"** can be a stumbling block for many of us who have received mercy and forgiveness, but have a hard time showing it to others.

During the pandemic many Americans, including a number of members of Congress, received loans through the Paycheck Protection Program in order to ensure that small businesses and non-profits survived. In time, the government forgave those loans.

"Forgive us our debts..."

When President Biden released his student debt forgiveness plan, several notable members of Congress cried foul, until like the ungrateful servant in Jesus' story, it was revealed that their own PPP loans were forgiven.

"as we forgive our debtors."

As Americans we are drowning in debt. Many students, families, individuals, seniors, including many of us here this morning, are crying for mercy and in need of debt relief.

The monetary aspect of debt relief is a complicated economic policy. I certainly don't fully understand the details around it.

What I do know is that as followers of Jesus, we are called to forgive our debtors as we have been forgiven of our debts, and that is both a financial and non-financial forgiveness of debts.

How then shall we, who profess to be followers of Christ, live into these words of the Lord's Prayer we so often pray and the Bible's teaching on debt forgiveness?

Amen.