



TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

12th November 2023, 23rd Sunday after Pentecost,

Forgive us our debts by Rev Dr Jordan Redding

*15 “Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts. 2 And this is the manner of the remission: every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbour, not exacting it, because the Lord’s remission has been proclaimed. 3 Of a foreigner you may exact it, but you must remit your claim on whatever any member of your community owes you. 4 There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, 5 if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today. 6 When the Lord your God has blessed you, as he promised you, you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you. 7 “If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbour. 8 You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. 9 Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, ‘The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,’ and therefore view your needy neighbour with hostility and give nothing; your neighbour might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt. 10 Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. 11 Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.’ **Deuteronomy 15:1-11***

43 Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. 44 All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having the

goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. Acts 2:43-47

The last few weeks, we've been working our way through the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6. Today we reach the phrase: "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors."

Now for the eagle-eyed among you, you might notice that we've skipped a bit: "give us today our daily bread." That's intentional. Only a couple of months ago, I delivered a sermon with that title as we reflected on a story from Exodus. I felt I would cover similar ground, so decided not to repeat it. But if you're interested in reading it, you can find it in our Sermons archive on the website.

So we come now to the next part of the prayer about forgiveness. And I would like to begin with something that David & Sandy Carden pointed out when they reflected on this topic a couple of years ago which some of you might remember.

(Incidentally, it was an excellent reflection and David drew substantially on his experience as a lawyer – which provided a nuance on this topic I could never provide. I'm sure they would be happy to share it with you if you're interested. I highly recommend it.)

Anyway, they quite rightly pointed out that there are two versions of the Lord's Prayer in the Bible – in Luke and in Matthew – and each says something slightly different. Luke's version uses the word "sins" while Matthew chooses to use the word "debts". Within the context of the prayer, both words are saying similar things and yet the different choice of word does shift the meaning somewhat.

And interestingly, the regular versions of the Lord's Prayer, which we use today, tend to favour Luke's version over Matthew's. When we pray the Lord's Prayer shortly we will be praying: "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

So, the question I have today is how the word "debt" changes what we're praying? I've got nothing against Luke's version by the way. But I do believe Matthew was intentional in retaining the word "debt". And I want to explore that a bit.

You know, in some ways I'm not surprised that Luke's version and not Matthew's has become the default phrasing we use in the church. And that's because the word "sin" (used here to describe a wrongdoing against God or other people) more clearly fits within the realm of spirituality, religion, morality. Whereas "debt" is a more ambiguous word and is used often in non-religious settings and without a clear moral dimension to it. If Matthew is using the word "debt" to describe a moral wrongdoing, then why not just use the word "sin"?

I wonder whether the gradual disfavour and disuse of Matthew's version also reflects the gradual secularisation of the Western world. That is, the separation of the church and religion from the public spheres of the town hall (politics) and the marketplace (economics).

This separation has been hundreds of years in the making. It began in the early modern period shortly after the Reformation as the new Protestant churches sought autonomy from meddling monarchs. The Presbyterian Church of Scotland, for instance, was one such church that was formed very much in protest against the authoritarian rule of British

monarchs like Charles I & II. Our Presbyterian forebears said very clearly that spiritual matters are the concern of the Church, not of the State.

The process of secularisation accelerated in the Enlightenment when the established authority of the Church was called into question by developments in science, philosophy, and the arts. And as that authority eroded, the church increasingly retreated in the sphere of private religion and individual morality.

All this has led us to our current day situation where faith and spirituality is seen as a private matter with no place in the public sphere. (Although I think that's changing in New Zealand through the recovery and integration of te Ao Māori.)

Now, I say all of this not in a judgemental way but simply to describe the world we live in today. The privatisation of religion and the secularisation of society are part of the air we breathe...which is why Matthew's translation is significantly more awkward. Because the word "debt", of course, is a marketplace term. It messily spills over from the private spiritual realm of religion into the public sphere of economics, business, and society.

But I think that's precisely the reason Matthew chose that word. In fact, I think he would have been confused by the secular dualism we see today.

Let's briefly consider the world that Matthew inhabited by looking at our two readings. The first is from the Old Testament – and we know Matthew was a Jewish male, well versed in the Hebrew scriptures, so he would have been well aware of this passage from Deuteronomy. The second is from the New Testament and describes the practices of the earliest church soon after Pentecost.

Both are remarkable passages. And what's clear is that both in their own way envisage a new kind of human society. A community that is ordered according to a new economics of grace that arises out of encounter with the God of grace.

In other words, personal faith with God is not just a private matter. It utterly revolutionises how we are to live in community with one another as the political and economic dimensions of our human relationships are transformed from the inside out. Here, the temple and the marketplace become messily intertwined!

Let me remind you briefly what was said in the Deuteronomy passage. Because I know it sounded a little dry. But it's not dry. So, in Deuteronomy 15, the law stipulates that every seven years any debt – any debt whatsoever – should be wiped clean. There's a bit of a caveat for foreigners. But even then, even for foreigners, the spirit of the law is that no one should remain indebted.

What's the intention behind this law? That no one should be in need. Everyone should have enough... now, even by today's standards, this two to three thousand year old vision is radical in its social and economic aspirations and it's grounded in a profound humanitarian concern for every human being that was remarkable for the time.

Today, we might hear this vision and see it as both unrealistic and simplistic in today's complex economic systems and global markets. For instance, we know that debt, in the case of national debt, can be an important vehicle of economic growth and improving our

quality of life. So I'm not suggesting that we should try and literally implement Deuteronomic law in the 21st century.

However, the intent *behind* the law, the spirit of the law, that none should be in need – surely that is a vision, a spirit, a dream to live by and to shape our collective imagination!

You know the most radical thing about this passage for me? That there is no questioning of why someone got into debt in the first place. There is no questioning of why they're poor. No speculation into their moral character. There are no ifs, no buts, no exceptions – just the command to forgive with the same grace with which God forgives us.

It's this kind of scriptural vision that provided the impetus for the development of the modern social welfare systems in historically Christian nations like New Zealand – which we simply take for granted today.

And if you thought Deuteronomy 15 is radical, consider our gospel reading! We heard today in Acts about the rather communistic practices of the early church community, where all property, all wealth was held in common and dispersed as each had need. That was the role of the deacons – to administer the common wealth and disperse it appropriately.

So we have two biblical readings that talk about debt within a radical economy of grace shaped by the grace of God. Both undoubtedly talk not simply about spiritual realities, but about material realities and the need to provide for the material wellbeing of all.

I suggested earlier that Matthew intentionally used the word “debt” – and the reason why is because of passages like these. When we pray “forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors” we are being invited to make a connection between the grace with which God deals with us and how we deal with one another in society. We are being invited to imagine a gospel-shaped economy of grace according to which no one among us has need.

So what does this mean in practice? To draw this reflection to a close, I want to suggest two things.

The first is that when we pray, “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors”, we are praying this prayer in the midst of and, in a sense, on behalf of the whole of society. We know, for instance, that poverty is a huge problem in New Zealand. Our statistics compared to other OECD countries are pretty dismal. The latest statistics estimate that 16% of children live in low-income households, 11% experience material hardship, and close to 15% run out of food either sometimes or regularly.

Debt plays a big part in exacerbating and entrenching intergenerational poverty. Things are only becoming more dire as the basic costs of living increase faster than wages. In real terms, people are becoming poorer.

When you work harder and harder and it's still impossible to make ends meet... well, Sisyphus comes to mind. The man of Greek myth who was doomed for eternity to push a rock uphill everyday only for it to roll all the way back down again. A vision of hell if I've ever heard one.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we are waking up to our social and *spiritual* responsibility to advocate for those in need in our society. That means, I think, being vocally outraged at

the reality I just mentioned and being willing to hold our politicians to account regardless of their political colours. We have a new government being formed currently and we need to let them know we're going to hold them to account on this.

So that's the first thing. The second is that, when we pray, "forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors", we are being called to action. The reality of being unconditionally loved by God stirs us to treat others with that same, contagious love. The two go hand-in-hand.

It's a life-long process of conversion (hence why we pray the Lord's Prayer every week) as our own dismissive assumptions are challenged and overturned. At the very least, we are being invited to create community where all are welcome regardless of what they look like, how they dress, or where they live.

But I'm also aware that there are many within our community who roll up their sleeves and get their hands dirty making positive change. For instance, a few members of this church have played and continue to play an instrumental role in the Tāmaki Budgeting Service, which helps people to manage budgets and pay-off debt. Others are regular supporters of organisations like Presbyterian Support, who run active programmes to support those in need in our society. There will be many other ways, seen and unseen, that you all live out and participate in the generous, abundance of God's grace. And to that I'd say:

Be encouraged. Be courageous. Be generous. As we work together for the freedom of others as God in Christ has freed us. Together, may we liberate Sisyphus from his hell. Amen.