

Forgive Us Our Debts?

I grew up praying the Lord's Prayer using the most authentic New Testament phrasing, "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." Other versions of this prayer speak of "trespasses" or "sins". The language of "debts" and "debtors," which possesses both literal and metaphorical meaning, has always seemed more profound. Who among us is not indebted, if not literally and legally then certainly metaphorically, to someone else? We owe so much of our lives and fortunes to the gifts and sacrifices of others – more than we can ever repay!

Moreover, Jesus and the early Christians understood this-worldly conditions. They knew just how debilitating and destructive debt can be. Jesus' reference to "debts" echoes biblical teaching regarding debt forgiveness and the year of Jubilee, when all "homestead" properties were to be returned to their original owners and all persons who had indentured themselves were to be set free. There was to be no permanent indebtedness, for that would mean permanent disenfranchisement within the human community, a kind of permanent enslavement.

So what does this prayer say to us these days? You've noticed we're in the midst of a huge financial crisis. Among other things, there is an enormous amount of debt out there that may never get repaid. I have very mixed feelings about the government's bailout/buyout package. Was it really necessary? It has not kept the value of my savings and retirement funds from plummeting. It seems unlikely it will do much to help the average citizen struggling to make ends meet. And it did little to alter the way we Americans do "business."

Let's beware of so much power and money controlled by so few people. We need more corporate accountability, much more serious caps on executive pay, an even greater equity stake by government in the "assets" it may acquire, new banking and investment regulations, and much stricter oversight regarding who decides who gets bailed out. Above all, we need a new sense of priorities. Let's treat Wall Street the way Wall Street treats Main Street and the rest of the country. Government should act to freeze home mortgage foreclosures, giving ordinary people the chance to work out their financial difficulties with every bit as much forgiveness, assistance, and patience as Wall Street has been asking of the rest of us. Forgive Wall Street its debts, *as Wall Street forgives its debtors.*

Now let us pray together . . .

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