

Forgive Us Our Debts

Did Jesus really tell that story? And if he did, why did Luke think he needed to include it in his gospel?

Once again, it is the curriculum of the Thursday morning men's Bible study which has steered your preachers to a scripture which any sensible person would avoid. This is a confounding story. St. Augustine, the church's illustrious 4th century North African theologian, is said to have remarked, "I can't believe this story came from the lips of our Lord."

It sounds more like a script from a modern-day movie, you know, one of those films which exposes the excesses of big business, how the pursuit of wealth can steal the soul. The protagonist in this story learns this the hard way, yet is canny enough to manipulate the system to regain a place in the world. And maybe even come out a bit wiser.

This is the way I picture the Hollywood version. The first person we meet is Harry, a mid-level manager in an unspecified business. His job is ensuring that all profits are funneled to the top. Harry wears a suit and carries a briefcase to work, where he takes the elevator up to the 35th floor. The boss is not there often, but when he shows up, all the workers in their cubicles defer to him. We watch Harry playing this game, acting like a loyal company man, but as omniscient viewers, we know he's scrambling. He's fudging the numbers because the business isn't producing the profits the boss wants. So one morning the boss arrives, and Harry receives a summons to the corner office.

"The game's up, Harry. I hired you to bring in \$1 million a week, and it's not happening. Report to HR. You're fired."

But instead of reporting to the officious human resources officer, Harry slips out the elevator and hails a taxi. He's off to one of the business' customers. "Fred, I know you owe \$100,000, but pay me \$50,000 and we'll call it good." And another, "Samantha, how about a deal? You give me \$25,000 and we'll forget about the other \$25,000." With cash in hand, or at least good checks, he heads back to the office. He meets the boss in the elevator.

"Here it is, sir, what I collected. The rest--well, that will be up to someone else to collect. Because I'm doing now what you told me to do this morning--packing up my desk and turning in my keys."

And, since this is the Hollywood version, off goes Harry to meet up with the woman he's long been ignoring, the one who truly loves him but who has had a hard time getting his attention because he's been so busy running the rat race. It's--Samantha! One of the company's debtors! She'll welcome him into her life, and her home. They may not be rich, but they can live on love.

While back in the corner office, the boss is left alone to ponder, what just happened? Maybe Harry is smarter than I thought. Maybe Harry is even smarter than me.

Okay, that could be the contemporary version of the parable. But you're probably still wondering, "where is God in this story?" You wouldn't be alone. It's a confounding story. It's a parable, which is not the same as a morality tale.

One commentator defines a parable this way: “A grassroots lesson connecting the ordinariness of life with the extraordinary nature of God.” (Helen Montgomery DeBevoise, 2010, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C Vol. 4, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, p. 92) In ordinary life we meet people of questionable character. We engage in transactions of questionable virtue. If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that our motives are mixed as we navigate the world. And one aspect of our world which mixes our motives quite frequently is money. Harry is not a paragon of honesty or ethics. He’s a lot like a lot of us—just trying to get by, to make it all work out so that he has a reasonably comfortable place in the world.

And he’s operating in an economic system which is far from paradise. Just as in Jesus’ day, these days it seems that a few people control a disproportionate share of the wealth. It seems that a lot of people, no matter how hard they try, can’t get ahead, are living paycheck to paycheck, on the edge of a financial cliff over which they might topple given a health crisis, or an unexpected family need, or a job loss. In Jesus’ day, these were the peasants who had to pay their landlords with what they could raise on the land, who owed exorbitant taxes to the Roman Empire, compounded by unscrupulous tax collectors who could add their own fees to the take. In another economic day, another time and place, these were the company workers who had to buy their everyday needs from the company store, but their income was never quite enough to match their needs, so as the song goes, they “owed their souls to the company store.” In our day, many people feel like no matter how hard they try, they keep falling farther and farther behind. You’ve heard it said, the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. In our story, Harry is the one in the middle, who decides to cast his lot with the masses, the ordinary folks. He’s a Robin Hood figure. The rich man, the boss, catches a glimpse of this critique of the economic system, and admits its truth. The system is rigged. Harry, you are a smart guy.

Now the fact that Luke places a series of statements about money and our relationship to it immediately after this story gives credence to this interpretation, that this is a story Jesus told to expose the problems of the economic system of his day. In all the centuries which have followed, no perfectly fair or equitable economic system has ever been developed. Biblical wisdom can guide us as we navigate the world of money. Biblical wisdom asks us, Which master are we serving? Wealth is a powerful god, that is, an idol, which draws many worshipers. Like the manager in the parable, we are stewards, not owners, of resources. Sharing those resources with others is commendable, even when our motives are mixed. Practicing good stewardship is exactly that, practice. And practice helps us grow towards Godly motivations, and Godly results. I believe this is a plausible interpretation of this puzzling parable for us today.

But I’d like to offer an additional interpretation. What if this story is also a midrash on the prayer, “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors?” What if Rabbi Jesus is expanding on his teaching about prayer with a story to make us think more deeply about what might otherwise become a rote phrase? That’s what rabbis did, and still do.

Harry’s survival strategy was debt forgiveness. You don’t need to pay the full amount, he told the folks who owed the boss. And by doing so, he did make friends for himself. For reasons we can only speculate about, this pleased the boss, the rich man, the master.

What if we think of the master in the story as analogous to God, and compare Harry, the squandering steward, to Christ? And then make the debtors humankind? Christ squanders God’s bounties on us, we who don’t deserve such grace, such forgiveness of debts or sins or trespasses, whatever you name our past. Christ freely releases us from debts we owe to God, to give us a fresh

start, a new beginning. It is a prodigal squandering, like that in the story which immediately precedes it in Luke's gospel, overflowing and even wasteful giving away. And it is boundary-breaking, in contrast to the story of the rich man and Lazarus which comes afterwards, a story we'll take on next Sunday. The forgiveness of debts sets aside the usual rules, saying, let's wipe the slate clean, let's start over, let's give you another chance to do things right. And whether we are rich or poor or somewhere in the great in-between, that's what we all need.

If Christ is the great forgiver of debts, then who are we to hold onto the past and its hurts, its mistakes, its sinful ways? Who are we to continue doing what we've always done just because we're in the habit? And who are we to hold others to accountability when we desperately need forgiveness ourselves? Christ's way, and our way if we follow him, is to forgive our debts and model forgiving our debtors. Christ pays the redemption price to set us free, free from ANYTHING we owe to God.

Pastor Steve Garnaas-Holmes says of this interpretation,

That sounds like Jesus. Sure, you owe God your life. But you have also prayed a thousand times, "Forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors." Even our debts to God are erased. Sins are forgiven, lepers are cleansed, debts are canceled, the lost are returned, the dead are raised. Jesus seems to be all about erasing the past and starting new.

Maybe Jesus wants to cut us some slack. Maybe you don't owe God what you think you do. It's all a gift--what you get from God, and what you give back. Take out your bill. What does it say? What do think you owe God? What do you need to atone for? Well, you don't owe God anything. Try that on for a day. See if it helps you feel "welcomed into the eternal homes."

(9/14/16, <http://unfoldinglight.net/>)

And see if it makes you into a more forgiving person, a more grace-filled person, one who gives to others what has been freely received, thanks to Christ. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. God in Christ does forgive us all, asking us only to pass on forgiveness.

So even if we are as conniving as Harry, even if we feel as oppressed as the peasants and workers and common folk of the world, or even if we are tangled in financial webs because we have more money than we know what to do with, there is still a chance for a new start. It's called living in Christ, accepting a life that is richer in grace than in all the money in the world, living in an abundance of love and mercy received and shared.

There is no greater wealth than this, to know and live in the saving grace of God in Christ. Children of light, you are welcome in the eternal home made for you by God. And we can live in it now.

Friends, believe the good news.

In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.

