

FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS

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Psalm 51

Last month, the President—Joe Biden—signed an order to reduce the debt on loans that had been taken out by students for college or graduate school. What this legislation does is to forgive up to \$10,000 in federal student loans and up to \$20,000 for the recipients of Pell Grants. The program is not for every borrower. If anyone paying back their student loan has an income over \$125,000, they are not candidates for this program. They are doing okay. Also, in the future, debt repayment will be capped at 5% of a person's income.

The president is proposing additional rule changes to improve the way these federal student loan programs operate. One of these proposals to make it so that no loan balance will increase as long as the borrower makes their monthly payments. In response to that, one borrower explained that his monthly interest is over 150% of his monthly payment. Although he makes his payment each month, his balance continues to grow. But because of his salary, he is unable to pay more. Before the president's order, this person didn't think that they would ever get out from under this debt.

The intention of this debt forgiveness program is to lessen the burden of student debt on people who are struggling, to give them some breathing room.

In this country, we like to say that a person can pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. If you work hard, you can make it. One recognized path to success (among many) is post-secondary education—college and graduate school. Unfortunately, today, too many who earn their degrees find themselves saddled with insurmountable debt that they spend years paying off—if they are able to do it at all.

The president's program has been controversial, to say the least. Many object to what they call "handouts." Some say that we are giving money to deadbeats. But these aren't deadbeats. These are people who embarked upon an educational journey with the goal of improving themselves, with the goal of making a better living. Along the way, they got caught in a system of toxic debt.

When I graduated 32 years ago, I had debt from graduate school. The programs were simple then. Interest rates were low. Each year, I got a payment book and each month I would tear out a page and place it along with a check in the mail. I remember the day when I sent in that last check. It was also the day that I happened to pay off my car. It was a good day.

But I was lucky. I had a good job. I was single. I'm naturally thrifty. But I also had the cushion of family wealth. I knew that if I got into trouble, I could turn to my parents. I never did, but it was reassuring to have that option.

For many who have accrued student debt, there is no generational wealth to give them a cushion. When these borrowers get caught in a debt spiral, they have no options. Their debt simply increases until it consumes them.

It is estimated that the president's program will affect 43 million people. This program will fully eliminate the debt of 20 million of those people.

The student loan landscape has changed dramatically since I graduated. Since 1980, even accounting for inflation, college costs have tripled. I know that when some of you went to school it cost what, \$100 a quarter. Before that, it was five chickens and a sack of flour.

Do you know what college costs today? Well, for example, at Cumberland (just next door), tuition alone (not room and board), costs \$25,000 a year. Four years at Cumberland will set you back \$100,000. Yes, there are scholarships and financial aid. But imagine graduating from college being \$100,000 in debt. You are trying to start your way in the world, and you are already underwater. How do you buy a car, or a house, or start a family, or start a business?

Here's the cost for some other schools. Tuition at UT-Knoxville is \$13,000 in-state. Out-of-state tuition runs \$31,000. Vanderbilt will set you back \$54,000—which is about the same as Harvard. Vanderbilt Law School runs \$64,000. A year at Belmont costs \$40,000. MTSU, on the other hand, is a wonderful bargain at \$9,500. But schools are more than just tuition. There are books and fees and living expenses. The expenses multiply.

The tuitions at public universities have increased as states have committed less and less money toward supporting them. These rising costs are passed on to the students.

Back in the 80s, it was possible to attend a state school, receive financial aid, work on campus and then work in the summer and be able to graduate debt free. That is not possible today.

Pell Grants were designed to help lower-income families borrow for school. At one time, Pell Grants paid for 80% of school. Today, Pell Grants only cover 32%. A lower-income student who wants to attend college must take out additional loans from private lenders. In fact, in 2004, the student loan industry was privatized, meaning that private lending institutions, such as Sallie Mae, could make loans with federal money but charge higher interest rates with ballooning payments.

Furthermore, federal loans have caps. Undergraduates can only borrow up to \$12,500 each year when the average cost of tuition is \$35,000. Once again, students who don't have family money are forced to go to private lenders if they want to go to school. With private lenders, interest begins accruing immediately. This has students drowning before they even graduate.

I could go on for hours with facts and figures about the plight of student debt. I haven't even touched on the subject of systemic racism. But I'd like now to turn to scripture.

We all know that within our scripture, there are numerous discussions about money. But there is also a lot of talk about debt and forgiveness. Our reading today from Psalm 51 which opens with a cry to God for mercy. The implication is that God has been wronged in some way by the one doing the asking. The writer then pleads to God's "steadfast love." In Hebrew, this word is the powerful word *khesed* and it describes God's limitless, unconditional love. *Have mercy on me, O God, according to your khesed.* The writer then asked that God *blot out his transgressions, and wash him from his iniquity, and cleanse him from his sin.* These transgressions, iniquity, and sin are all unavoidable because we are born into sin; we are born guilty; we are conceived into sin. Because the writer has sinned against God, the writer deserves whatever punishment that God doles out.

But the writer prays for forgiveness. He says, *Purge me with hyssop and make me clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.* And then finally, the writer prays to God and asks, *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.*

The writer of the psalm confesses his sins before the Lord. They are his transgressions, his debts. But he asks the Lord to have mercy and to forgive him, *to create* in him a *clean heart*. What this writer seeks is nothing less than a forgiveness of his debts to the Lord. He desires some breathing room so that he may kick-start his life and get back on track. And the word *create* is the same Hebrew word used in Genesis in the creation story. And in the Old Testament, this word is only associated with God. The writer is appealing to the unique, creative ability possessed only by God to change his life, to erase the debt of his sins.

That's what God does. God erases the debt of our lives. Alone, we are unable to escape the spiral of sin. We need God to bring the forgiveness that leads to new life.

As we talk about debts, maybe a scripture passage that we are more familiar with would be the sixth chapter of the gospel of Matthew. Here, we find Jesus teaching about prayer. He tells the people that when they pray, they are not to do so like the hypocrites who like to pray in public where they will be seen by others. But when you pray, Jesus says, go to your room and shut the door and pray to God. And when you pray, keep it simple. You don't need to heap up empty words.

And then Jesus offers the words that we know as the Lord's Prayer. And in this prayer, he provides several petitions that the disciples should pray. One of these concerns debts—*Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

In Greek, the word for debt means “something which is owed.” Debt is the word used in the King James translation of the Bible. A later translation uses the word trespasses, which means “overstepping a boundary.” A contemporary translation asks God to forgive us our sins. But I like debts not just because I grew up Presbyterian, but because of the implied tension of something owed, an imbalance between us and God. A debt is not static. A debt seeks to be settled. And the debts we have with God accrue interest and become more lob-sided.

When Jesus talks about debts, the people no doubt also thought of real, monetary debts—the kind of debts that drive people off their family land, the kind of debts that end in bankruptcy and imprisonment. When Jesus spoke of forgiving debts, he was talking to people who understood too well the reality of debt. At this time in Judah, the Romans were taxing the people heavily in order to fund the empire. At the same time, the wealthy were acquiring family farms and forcing the former owners to become tenant farmers. The people understood debt.

When Jesus preached about salvation in God's kingdom and the forgiveness of debts, the people got it. If the kingdom is like losing the burden of debt, then sign me up. Ending debt is life-changing stuff. It is freedom. It is resurrection.

Take a moment and remember a time when you were in debt. What did it feel like? Had you lost hope? Were you suffocating? Now imagine suddenly being released from that debt. What is that like? Can you feel the great weight being lifted? Can you feel the freedom? That freedom is a precious gift not unlike the gift of Jesus taking our sins and paying our debt with his death.

As forgiven people, we are to model God's mercy and actively practice forgiveness ourselves. *Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven those who debt against us.* Forgiveness is not free. It comes with the call to forgive others. We can stand before God and request forgiveness while at the same time offering our forgiveness to others.

When the president announced the forgiveness of student debt in August, it wasn't just to give money away, it was an attempt to free people from the shackles of owing money, to give them a second chance, to enable them to take their education and use it to the fullest.

We may not be saddled with college debts, but as the psalm reminds us, we are all born into sin. We are guilty, we are stained, we are in debt to God. But by some miracle of love and mercy, God comes to us and offers forgiveness.

Thanks be to God! Amen.