

# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *Prayer, Part 5 Forgive Us Our Debts*

A St. Andrew's Sermon  
Delivered by Jim Rigby  
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Scripture Readings: Matthew 6:9-13 and Mark 11:12-25 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Today we're looking at two of the strangest and most misunderstood stories in the Bible. The first story is the withering of the fig tree – now if I was smart I would just do one of them, but as you have discerned that is not my style – but the story of the fig tree if you take it at face value it is very problematic. Jesus is going along (the story says it was not the time of year for figs) and he looks at the fig tree, wants figs, he really likes figs and [the tree] doesn't have any figs, so he withers it. Now if that were you or I, that would rightly be called a tantrum. Right? You want figs; it doesn't have figs so you curse the tree. But you can't [call it a tantrum] because it's Jesus. (Jesus, you're absolutely right to curse that tree. That tree was way out of line). This is one of those places where we need to realize it's a teaching story. And the message is so wonderful that they put it in a package of miracles. It's called a rabbinic story. That's why, in this story they call him "Rabbi," so you realize that's the tradition the story is coming from. You *tell* the story in a miraculous way because the *lesson* is miraculous. Unfortunately we don't understand that now. So you've got this very problematic story of a fig problem. Let's be honest.

Then the second one is also a bit problematic. It's the story of the cleansing of the Temple, because it's one of those places where Christians who engage in violence use this as their proof that Jesus condones violence. And you have to search really hard because somebody says "turn the other cheek." You really have to do some nuancing to turn that into this violent message. But if you look at the story, he doesn't hit people with the whip. It's clearer in another version of it where he is taking the whip and driving the cattle out. Now he's going to have problems with PETA but that's a different issue. He's not hitting the people. We're going to look at both of these stories, hopefully, to make a third strange saying clearer and that is "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Have you ever been at [an ecumenical] worship service and [while repeating the Disciple's Prayer] they got to that place, and it was part Catholic, part Methodist, part Presbyterian? – that awkward place [where] trespasses and debtors [is said?] And everybody is tripping on it. This is actually a place where I think the Presbyterians are right, which is good because we are usually wrong on so many things. But the word in Greek is "debts" and "debtors." And what I believe – you don't have to believe it – but what I believe is that it is talking about Jubilee. That throughout Jesus' teachings, he's talking about that practice (Jubilee – that never happened in the Jewish tradition) where every fifty years you'd redistribute the goods. If somebody was in poverty you'd free them from the poverty. If somebody was in prison you'd free the prisoners. The teachings of Jesus make so much more sense if you realize what He's talking about is Jubilee. It's Leviticus 25. You can look it up. But it is not just this romantic otherworldly view of things. It is a call-to-work towards a kind of world that we all want deep in our heart.

So he's going to teach us to pray, and in this Disciple's Prayer, you are going to have all different kinds of aspects of prayer. But one of them is caring about the rest of the world, and believing that

maybe you can do something to help in your own small way. To understand why Jesus has to put this in there you have to understand the despair of the time. That little wooden thing behind me – the cross – was a political message. In Rome, the territories occupied by Rome, you put this along the way and so anybody that saw that realized that they had to stay in line. What that meant was: you don't question the Empire, you keep your religion to yourself and you don't question the economic arrangements. You do that (stay in line) and you're fine. That's a very ancient message, and even in the free-est of countries, like our own, you are free until you exercise your rights over and against the rich and powerful; in which case, your rights get pulled back.

Joseph Stiglitz is the person who inspired the 1% that you hear, or the 99%. As I've said in Sunday School class I don't like the idea simply because it's blaming individual people. And I think the problem is the system and that's what we have to look at. To get angry with the 1% is to miss the point that we might [have] become the 1% if we'd been luckier or better. Right? That what we need to do is to change the whole system because you get rid of that 1% and guess what's waiting right around the corner. Yeah, 99 more 1%. So, Jesus is trying to change how we approach the issue itself. But Joseph Stiglitz is an economist and the strange thing about Joseph Stiglitz is that he's one of the very few economists that actually think about the poor...because most economists work for rich people. Right? Their grants come from rich people, they work at rich universities, they're endowed, which means that they're not going to be too prophetic with their endowments coming from a source of conflict. But listen, this is what Joseph Stiglitz said – he's the one that said “the 1%”...“The upper one per cent of Americans are not taking in nearly a quarter of the Nation's income every year. In terms of wealth, rather than income, the top 1% controls 40 %, while the top 1% have seen their incomes rise 18% over the last decade. Those in the middle have actually seen their incomes fall.” Now what he was trying to draw a point to – and most of us can feel it, but we weren't necessarily able to articulate it, is that the rich are getting richer and everybody else is getting worse off. People are working harder than they've ever worked, making less, but profits are greater than ever before. So it is all being funneled to a very small select group...and it's tearing us apart. The discrepancy now is beginning to look like nations that we feel sorry for. I don't know if you heard about one of the foreclosure companies [that] had a Halloween party – anybody hear about this? – their job was to foreclose on people's homes, so for the Halloween party, a costume party, people came dressed as the homeless that they'd kicked out of their homes. Now don't you think that it's probably a traumatized soul that would do something like that? It's somebody at some level who hates what they are doing, but they're so numb to it, so distanced from it that they are playing out their own treachery and not realizing it. Somebody brought a cell phone to take a picture of it. Cell phones are a real problem. How many of the scandals we've had that if it weren't for cell phones and WikiLeaks, we'd have no idea?... which is why we need to act on them now because they are going to take care of that. They will figure out how to have that not be a problem.

The Occupy Wall Street Movement is different than anything I've seen probably since the Viet Nam days in that it is people – they may not have wisdom – they are a very young group – sometimes they're rudderless – sometimes they do silly things – but they are willing to cross the line. What we're looking at today in our story, this dumping the tables over, is the very first Occupy; it's Occupy Jerusalem. It's civil disobedience. What made Martin Luther King different, what made Gandhi different is not just that they were nice, they were nice, but they dramatized the oppression by stepping across the line. When early Christians were baptized they were baptized where? The Jordan River where the Israelites crossed over into the Promised Land. Baptism is not just putting water on little babies' heads, so that they don't go to hell. Alright? That's a religion for children. It's christening for a purpose. Christening for a Calling. Where every one of us remembers our allegiance to humankind. And those that take up the name of Christ realize that the Parent of us all must be most concerned. I said in [Sunday School] class I believe it. I don't care. The rich can get everything *they want* after the poor get everything *they need*. But I don't have resentment against the rich. I don't care. I'm too

apathetic for that. But when you see a world racked with poverty—I was so grateful that somebody in the class today was honest enough to say, “you know, there’s 7 billion people on the Earth; if we divide it up, I don’t like how that looks. I don’t want to do that. Thank you. Thank you for that honesty. That’s the problem. Jesus calls us to do that and we don’t want to do it.

That’s the situation, isn’t it? It’s not that we’re helpless; it’s not that we don’t *know* what to do. We don’t *want* to do it. That’s the first step; to realize what the situation is. The second is to realize that you probably can’t do it on your own and you probably can’t do it in your lifetime. Right? We’re not turning this boat around anytime soon. But, you can consecrate the rest of your life to living in a way to make that more likely; to plant seeds for the future, that’s what we’re talking about. Jesus is talking about prayer, but he’s doing it more profoundly so that we leave that cynicism. Do you remember that song by Leonard Cohen called “Everybody Knows”? I just thought of it this morning. In case you’re not bummed out enough...I want to say this will help take you over the edge. It says:

*Everybody knows the dice are loaded  
Everybody rolls with their fingers crossed.  
Everybody knows that the war is over.  
Everybody knows the good guys lost.  
Everybody knows the fight was fixed.  
The poor stay poor, the rich get rich.  
That’s how it goes...Everybody knows.*

It’s a real upbeat song. [It would] be a good birthday song. (*laughter*)

As Jesus gets on his donkey to go into Jerusalem, he’s going to face the greatest military empire that has ever existed. He’s going to confront a religion that has been bought by the culture, that belongs to the culture—there are radical exceptions to that-- but that’s who is calling the shots. And there’s an economic system that isn’t fair. And Jesus is going to get on his little donkey and he’s going to ride it into town and he’s going to trigger a firestorm. One person, defenseless, non-violent, he’s going to change the equation for all time—at least until the Church got hold of it, and, you know, took the message out. This is about Heaven on Earth. Thy Will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven. This isn’t pie in the sky. It’s pie here, but it’s pie with very small slices for each one of us because we’re sharing; and it tastes better because we’re sharing. Jesus is talking about prayer that’s going deep in your heart and remembering this is what you want. You don’t want to be a cog in a machine. That’s not what you want, that’s not who you are. You always wanted to serve humankind; you have always known that you had a destiny to work and sacrifice and share and give a gift nobody else that’s ever lived could give. That’s who you are.

Now Jesus is not going to tell you what to do. You understand that by now, right? You look at the New Testament; it doesn’t tell you what to do. It tells you who you are. It tells you who your neighbor is, and it tells you who your enemy is. And they’re all children of one God. The way Einstein said it is *when you get confused, you don’t know what to do, remember your humanity and forget the rest*. Whenever you’re confused and you don’t know what to do, remember your humanity and forget the rest. Now Jesus is going to walk us through that little lesson. There’s no higher destiny than to be a child of God, which is what every human being is – every one of us, when we hear the call and answer.

OK. Here is mystery number one solved. The fig tree story is not about figs. And it’s not about a tantrum. The fig tree was the symbol of Israel. It was on their coins. Again, it’s a teaching story. You don’t have to worry about how it happened. What it’s saying is because the nation of Israel did not feed the poor, did not produce the fruit—that befits not righteousness but justice, is that word. It died

from the inside out. Can anybody think how that might relate to us? Do you think the prophets would be that harsh on one nation and not on another nation? See, that was the problem. People thought, okay, I'm an Israelite, I can't do anything wrong. My God needs me. We may have made a few mistakes, but God needs Israel. And the prophets were not anti-Semitic. They loved Israel more than anybody else and they say "you're wrong!" You are wrong because you've misunderstood what Israel is. Israel is a light on the hill for the whole world. That's what it always was – what every nation should be. What sense does it make to teach our children that Jesus said turn the other cheek, and at the same time we teach them that if their leaders say go kill somebody you've never met...on the shakiest of evidence, that you're supposed to not turn the other cheek anymore? Who's calling the shots when we do that? What happens to this thing we call Christianity? What happens to that One we say we are following? When he gets trumped time and time again. What would happen if somebody trusted it and believed in it? When Jesus said your prayers will all come true, it's not that God's going to do what you want. When you pray enough, you are going to *want what God wants*. That's the heart that needs to change – not God's. God is pretty smart, does a pretty good job. I'm the one who needs to listen and re-tune.

So, God bless the nation that serves all humankind – that's the Promised Land. And God—what was the word that the preacher said?--I can't remember---God *something* the nation---I can't remember what it is-- fortunately nobody remembers that either—Obama's pastor, remember the – never mind, I 'm not that brave – and it's not – the problem is not one nation or another nation. It's *every* nation that's forgotten the human family.

Then the second thing – so Jesus is saying forget your nation for a moment as you pray, and remember all of humankind. Then second is to forget your religion for a moment. Forget Christianity for a moment and remember your humanity because that's who Jesus came to serve. Religion shouldn't be mean and it shouldn't be stupid. But we can be both of them, can't we? And often are. And this is the reason why: we lose our heart. We stop listening to our humanity, and really, start serving other gods. So, Jesus goes in – and the way it was divided up – you had women on one part, women could go just so far; you had the Gentiles, filthy dogs, could only go so far; unclean; then you had the Hebrew males that could come closer; and, of course, the priests, no problem with us, so we go all the way in. And Jesus said. "No." "Uh-uh." "That's over." There's not a curtain anymore between people and God. That circus is over. He says, "my house was intended to be house of prayer for *all* people." Ever seen that line before? *For all people*. There's no asterisk there. There's nobody excluded from that calling. We put the asterisks there. My home is to be a house of prayer for all people. Now what got Jesus in trouble is to say the whole world belongs to God, the whole world is God's home, which means every person everywhere has a place in this plan. The church shouldn't be a place where you can come and hide from that calling. But that's what it's become. See that's when he says you've made it a den of thieves. We shouldn't come here and talk about love, and then go out there and mistreat one another. So it says, for a moment, anyway, forget the religion you were taught long enough to hear your human heart. That's a gift from God.

Now, the last thing, and this is the hardest...believe it or not, because as I've said before, the god of the United States is capitalism. You can talk about almost anything before you talk about that. To surrender responsibility to an economic system is to worship an idol. Adam Smith would be horrified if he realized we'd surrendered responsibility to an economic system, and we were letting people starve or suffer because we didn't take responsibility for it.

Let me give you a little thought experiment to take home with you. You don't have to agree with me, but what I'm challenging you to do is to go where truth leads you. Disagreeing with me is not a problem, that's real easy, right? You're able to do that in almost every sermon. But where does truth lead you on this one? What I want you to do is imagine taking any animal on the planet, any species. I

choose chimpanzees, so you have to choose a different one. I love chimpanzees. Now let's say we take chimpanzees – you use your own animal – and I'm going to set up operant conditioning...you know what that is, where you reward the behaviors you like, and you punish, or just don't do anything, when the animal does what you don't want or like. Now, let's say you take any animal on the planet and you reward them for being greedy, for amassing wealth, you reward them for that. Now you may not punish them for sharing, but you don't reward them. What's going to happen to that species? Any...pick your species. Now what happens when you say, "well, you know we keep getting these creeps on top, and what we need to do is find nicer people, [maybe] nicer chimpanzees?" Let's run chimpanzees for office. But then they get in office and they don't act like we thought they would, because they're getting bananas for doing the wrong thing. They are not getting anything for doing the right thing. And you say, "well let's do regulations," missing the point that when the most mischievous chimps get on the top, they're going to cheat. *They are going to cheat.* You cannot have any animal I know of flourish in that system, because you're rewarding the thing you're trying to get rid of, or at least harness [it.] And you're punishing or disregarding the behavior that you want, that could unify people.

So, this is not an attack on business. If you want to call something else capitalism, that's fine. I'm not going to get lost on words, but I am saying this: when you use property and power to organize your culture, you're going to wind up in exactly the hole that we are in now, every time. Has anybody here ever played monopoly? Has it ever gotten to the point where everybody was happy at the end of it? *(laughter)* Wow! What a surprise. Learn. The chimpanzees learn. Whatever animal you chose learns. We need to learn, too.

The church should not be a place where we come to escape from the core message. We pray for a certain type of world; forgive us our *debts*, we turn it into *sin*, to *trespasses*. That's easy. I mean, [yes,] it's hard, but not [hard] like it would be to forgive debts of poor nations and poor people. Not [hard] like it would be to redistribute the land and the wealth and the power and to really work to free prisoners. Yes, it's an impossible dream. But going in that direction we will find our humanity. Going in any other direction we will find nightmares and heartbreaks. Jesus went into Jerusalem with nothing, nothing, a donkey maybe and He changed the world. But he was trying to teach you to be true to your humanity, too...not just to come here and say nice things about Jesus, but to realize in your life, this week, you will face time and time again decisions of power and entitlement. [They] may be small, but they could be the place where big seeds are planted for the future. Jesus said my house should be a house of prayer for all people. There's no place for racism, there's no place for sexism in this house. But there's no place for hierarchy, either.

Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. There's more [there] than personal forgiveness. *It's the remedy for what's killing us.* It's going deep in our hearts and remembering that aspiration we had as children...the love that we had for people and animals, and the whole deal that's been laughed out of us. And then, returning to it and listening to that voice again and letting it get strong, so strong that it guides us and helps us make our decisions until we finally live our lives for our highest ideals. And if you can't remember how to do that, don't panic. *Remember your humanity and forget the rest.*

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