

“Forgive Us Our Debts”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
September 18, 2022

Amos 8:4-7
Luke 16:1-13

Each week, or even every day, Christians pray a prayer with the line “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” Some say trespasses instead of debts, but Presbyterians ask for debt forgiveness and promise to give it too. It becomes rote enough that we may gloss over it without thinking about the scandal of that line. The scandal of debt forgiveness bubbled up last month when the government decided to forgive up to \$20k in student loan debt. Across the nation, there were people— many of whom claim Christianity as their faith, who were scandalized.

Jesus gives a parable about debt forgiveness, and it highlights just how scandalous it is. He uses the story about a work situation to tell it.

Have you heard about the term “quiet quitting?” In the age of the pandemic, this is one of many norms that have come to shape our lives.

Quiet quitting is doing the basic job description that is asked of you, but not going above and beyond.

The term “quiet quitting” has been getting tons of buzz lately— even though the phrase was only coined in August. Some might fairly argue: if someone is doing their job, that isn’t quiet quitting; it’s having good boundaries. It is not doing work that you won’t get paid for. As one article in *The Atlantic* states, “What the kids are now calling ‘quiet quitting’ was, in previous and simpler decades, simply known as ‘having a job.’”¹

But I suppose we needed a term to hold the commonality that many people feel to give definition to that feeling of *just getting by* that many people have in this era, and this one speaks to those who especially experience that feeling in a workplace that does not ignite their passion.

An alternative to quiet quitting, **having hustle** means you actively move and shape your work environment to get the outcome you desire: more satisfaction, more clients, more business, more money.

This even happens in school. And at the beginning of the school year, the hustle is especially intense. Around 7th or 8th grade, I see many youth decide whether they are going to stick close to the circle of friends they have had throughout their school career, or if they are going to branch out. If they branch out, it may be to try on a new identity to see if it fits: a new sport, a new instrument, a new style of dress. I have seen my daughter notice this shift as she has

¹ Derek Thompson, “Quiet Quitting is a Fake Trend” in *The Atlantic*, September 16, 2022

moved up to middle school, in that some of her closest friends prefer to sit and talk to one another during free time, rather than play. And so she asks herself, will I sit and gossip, or will I play? Will I do what my friends are doing, even if what they are doing isn't what I want to do? Or will I find people who like to do what I like to do? Or will I just go at it alone?

What's my hustle?

The social hustle is big; later on, students often figure out that they need an academic hustle too.

A hustle, according to the dictionary's simple definition, means "busy motion or movement" such as the hustle and bustle of Times Square. It can mean "an aggressive push." A hustle can also mean a "fraud or swindle."² In the prophet Amos's time, the religious people had a hustle going on: to tinker with balances so that they can charge the poor more than what a purchase is worth, and to devalue coins to increase their own wealth. So often we look at poverty and think that people end up poor because of their bad choices. But Amos identified practices of the rich that kept poor people poor. Can't we say the same is true today?

Urban Dictionary defines hustle as: "Anythin you need to do to make money... be it sellin cars, drugs, ya body. If you makin money, you hustlin."

When I was in seminary, my friend Erik and I worked as Street Chaplains. We walked the streets of Atlanta, doing outreach with homeless youth. Most of them had a hustle of some kind, whether standing at the corner with a cardboard sign or selling their bodies or drugs. There were more innovative hustles, such as the boy who worked as a squeegee man and would wash windshields at stoplights for money. More often than not, they were hustling for a safer place to stay during the night. Erik and I offered resources-- directing them to services for medical and mental health care, STD prevention, hot meals, recovery programs, safe places to sleep and programs that could help them reunite with their families. If they were open to it, we would pray with them. In our conversations and simply in our presence, we offered a different vision of God than the one that ruled in their heads or had even sent them running away from their homes and families. We took the statistics of the youth we encountered, ages 15-25, and submitted it to city officials-- who at that point were not keeping official data on homelessness and youth. We hoped that info could translate into a better support system for youth in crisis.

There is a hustle happening in the gospel story, and perhaps more than one. Here's how I imagine it goes:

The rich man had so much money, so much property, and so much to keep track of that he had to hire a manager to keep up with all his assets and make them profitable.

² This simple definition is from Google Dictionary.

Now, the rich man is shaking his head. His lips are curled as they uttered the words: "You're fired!" He had once seen something of himself in this young manager. So he took him on, an apprentice, and groomed him with the knowledge of how to bleed wealth out of peasants who had little.

Perhaps his apprentice learned his tricks *too* well, for now the rich man noticed his manager was siphoning off more than a salary's share to keep for himself.

It's hard to find good help, isn't it? So, the rich man sent the dishonest manager packing, demanding his cooked books back.

The manager was no longer a manager. In fact, he didn't know who he was. He realized no one in the village he once visited to collect debts would even open the door for him. He belonged to no one. With the daring of one who has nothing to lose, but everything to gain, he set about visiting each person he had cheated. To one, he cut the bill in half. To another, he saved 20 containers of wheat from the 100 that was owed.

On what authority did he discount those bills? Was his intention to change his image so he could live amongst the villagers? Was his intention to bring the money back to the rich man who had fired him, to hustle a deal that would redeem his role as a favored apprentice?

In other words, *what was his hustle?*

The scripture doesn't quite say.

What we *can* tell is that the manager's loyalties seem to have shifted-- from honoring his former boss, the rich man, to honoring the peasant poor whom he had once defrauded.

But then a funny thing happened, and here's the real hustle: The peasant people believed that the manager was still acting under the direction of the rich man. And, compared to the overwhelming debt they had once owed, they were going to be able to pay their debts and still have a bit tucked away for things they would need for themselves and their families. Very quickly, the narrative changed about the rich man. No longer were they talking about how greedy and corrupt he was. They were talking about how generous and merciful this rich man was. In their own little ways, they felt they had gotten a taste of his riches on that day.

Lectionary blogger Sarah Dylan Breuer suggests that the wealthy landowner stepped into the peasant village with cheers and acclamation. All of the sudden, the people see him as a local hero rather than a local villain. While he looks upon the appreciative faces surrounding him, he realizes he must face a decision. One option: he could expose his former manager for being dishonest and for pardoning debts that weren't his to pardon. But then, he would have to the anger of the village residents, as well as the increasing unlikelihood that they will ever repay him. Another option: he could rehire his manager and go along with that strategy of forgiving

debts, enjoying the favor of the people, and making decent money without squeezing every penny out of the people he serves.

He chooses the latter. And after this storytelling, Jesus says some words about faithfulness, dishonest wealth and true riches that is about as clear as mud. Somehow, in this parable, we are supposed to see ultimate, beautiful truth that will bring us closer to God.

So, Jesus, what *is* your hustle? What are you trying to sell us in this weird parable? I will tell you the biblical commentaries I read on several different ways.

One way we can read what it is Jesus might be hustling is that **God's mercy is on wholesale clearance**. We could put God into the role of the wealthy owner, which is not far from how people once saw God-- as a feudal Lord to whom we owe our wealth and our loyalties. However, times were changing; in the period of Jesus' teaching, there was another Lord-- the Roman emperor-- and if you came from the view of an oppressed people, this relationship was not looked upon favorably.

Jesus takes on the role of the manager and goes changing the ways the people will relate to God. Laws were broken: healings happened on a Sabbath; unclean men and women were touched and transformed; a new covenant was offered. In the eyes of those who had kept to a long and rich tradition, Jesus was **hustling** God's law.

Jesus also hustled for food. He searched the crowd and found the one boy with a few loaves and fishes, and somehow made it enough food for thousands of people. And Jesus hustled water, telling the woman at the well that he's selling a water that is living, and will make it so that she will never thirst again. Finally, Jesus hustles with his body-- not in the sense that street walkers may do, but in the sense that he used his body to broker a new relationship with God. Instead of being distant, Jesus' body made God near. Instead of ending with death, Jesus brokered a deal that would make his bodies and ours somehow transcend death.

Will we buy what Jesus is selling?

If we do, what then will be our hustle as Christians? It's a good question to ask as we start a new program year of church life together. How will our identity as Christians shape our angle at which we approach life? Do we even *have* hustle, or are we okay to be quietly quitting Christians, empty of passion and light?

I look at the crowd whom Jesus addresses in the parable: his disciples. Jesus here is training them for their own hustle: they will be bringing Jesus' message of mercy and love to the streets. Jesus wants to remind them of what they should represent on their hustle; "No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and wealth." The disciples are to represent God, not greed. They are to represent healing and hope, not heavy-handedness. Their approach

should be one of friendship, not force. When they do represent the law, they should also bring it with love.

As disciples ourselves, we are asked to take part in the holy hustle. We are asked to bring food to those who need it. We are asked to join the streams of living water as we live out the baptismal vows we make to the children baptized in the church. Jesus asks us to use our bodies as vehicles for the incarnational presence of God, as we show up to teach, to care, to serve one another.

Now *that's* a hustle that can give faith meaning.