

Have you ever wondered why in his beautiful little book *A Christmas Carol* Charles Dickens used the Miser Ebenezer Scrooge as his symbol for Christmas? Do you remember how Scrooge is redeemed on Christmas morning at the end of the story? And this redemption comes about when Scrooge opens his heart and his hands to those around him. He forgives the debts of the people to whom he has lent money. And through this, he begins to find the joy and the joyous companionship of a loving family. It would seem that forgiving a debt someone owes you is strongly linked to the act of you yourself being forgiven.

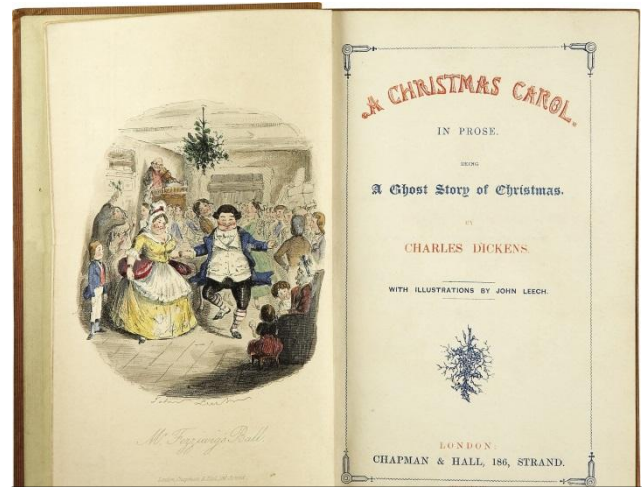
Did you note this link between debt and forgiveness in this morning's passage from Luke? In Luke Chapter 11, we have a kind of a stripped-down, bare-essentials, turbocharged form of that longer Lord's Prayer we find in Matthew's Gospel (see Mt.6:9-12). And did you notice what Luke says in verse 4? Forgive us our sins as we forgive those indebted to us." No talk of the more genteel "trespasses" here, is there? No, Luke goes straight for the jugular. It's sin for which we need forgiveness, and Luke's gonna' call a spade a spade. And furthermore, Luke says that to be really forgiven, you and I have to forgive those who owe a debt to us.

To incur a debt with someone is to owe them something. If you hurt someone, you're expected to make reparation for that wound. There is the mark of sin against you until you make amends. And just like Old Scrooge, if you and I are to be really forgiven, if we are to come face to face with the joyous freedom of salvation in Christ, then we must forgive all those who owe us, all those who've hurt us, all those who've wounded us. To be completely free, we must commit ourselves to whole-hog and whole-hearted forgiveness.

And there's the other side of this too. If you can't manage that kind of forgiveness, but instead if you insist on holding onto that anger and resentment and bitterness, well can you imagine what it must be like to take that anger and bile into the next world and live with that **forever**, separated by that un-forgiveness from the joy and bliss of The Lord for eternity? Why, you know, that's a pretty accurate description of Hell. The longer I wear this collar and the more deeply I get into the God business, the more I'm convinced that God didn't need to create Hell, because we actually make Hell for ourselves. No wonder the Lord warns us to forgive each other. Without forgiveness, there can be no Kingdom dwellers, either in this world or the next.

This link between our own forgiveness and our ability to renounce whatever hurt anyone has ever done to us – this thread that ties together our forgiveness with our ability to relinquish the presumption of some debt we believe is owed us – that is the common thread which ties the reading from Colossians to the Gospel passage this morning. Toward the end of this passage from Colossians Chapter 2, Paul says that on Golgotha, Christ "erased the written record that stood against us...He [nailed] it to the Cross" (Col.2:14).

The thing I want you to understand about this verse is that the "written record" that Christ erased for us by nailing it to the Cross, this "written record" which Paul describes here is actually defined by the Greek word which means "a certificate of indebtedness." Here's that concept of debt again. With the Fall of Man, you see, we all acquired a certain debt with God. With the betrayal in the Garden we hurt God deeply. We owe Him for the great wrong that man has done; we all of us participate in that debt. And that debt had to be paid, paid by the blood of a perfect sacrifice.



Title page of the original edition of *A Christmas Carol*

Of-course, it's not always easy to forgive. We human beings are wonderfully skilled at hurting each other. Sometimes, we hurt each other deeply. And some hurts are so deep and the scar tissue is so thick that try as we might, forgiveness remains elusive.

So, what are we to do? Well, in this passage from Luke, Jesus says that you just have to continue asking. You just have to continue knocking on that door of the heart, usually down there on your knees. And if you persist, if you persist with a dogged determination born of the Holy Spirit of God, Jesus **promises** that eventually, that door of the heart will indeed be opened to you, and the God of all goodness will by the power of that Holy Spirit set you free from all those unforgiving thoughts that weigh you down and blunt your spirit, and you will be free to be the complete man or woman of God which is truly the destiny for which you were so magnificently and lovingly created.



Suffering Christ from Kristlich-Kanal.Com

And lastly, with your indulgence, I want to talk about one more short passage from Scripture as it is written in the original language. Just before He gave up the ghost on His Cross, Jesus uttered the phrase *τετέλεσται*, (*Tete'lostai*). (See Jn.19:30) Our English-language Bibles translate this as "It is finished." And that's reasonably accurate. He had indeed come to the end of his mission of redemption. But another meaning of this phrase really does get lost in translation. In the Greco/Roman world of Jesus' day if you borrowed money from someone, you had to sign a promissory note – a promise to pay back that debt. And when the final payment on the debt was made, the lender would then give the promissory note back to the person who'd taken out the loan. But first, to prove that the debt had been cancelled, the lender would write across the promissory note the Greek phrase *Tete'lostai*; "It is finished - Paid in full."¹ You see, when Our Sweet Lord finally came to his last earthly breath there on that bloody hillside, He paid once and forever the debt that all mankind had owed God since the very beginning of creation.

Good people, we are all born into sin. There's not a single thing any of us can do about that. We're all of us fallen, and as we walk through this life we are constantly stubbing our toe. But we all want to be appreciated, and cherished, and respected. There's not a single person you'll ever meet who deep down doesn't need to feel that he or she is somehow the center of **somebody's** universe. It is human nature to want to feel special, and yet so often we confront situations where our specialness goes unrecognized. Life is full of unfairness and treachery suffered at the hands of others. And all of this is painful, and wounding, and so very hard to bear with cheerful grace and forgiveness.

But in those moments of injustice, if we can just remember the one who suffered so much more injustice on behalf of none other than you and me, we understand how much we must be worth to Him. Then we come to realize that we must indeed be the center of the universe of nobody other than God himself. And when you stand before that kind of humble suffering so willingly born for us, then the pain of our own suffering tends to pale in comparison and finally fade away. And if we can just spend enough time in the company of that beautiful loving Son of God, knocking on the door of the heart, then, yes, forgiveness comes. And we are finally, wonderfully, ecstatically free, free to be claimed as His very own. Praise God! Amen. jwb+ 7/25/2013

¹ See "Tetelostai – It is finished; paid in full" at <http://preceptaustin.wordpress.com/2013/04/05/tetelestai-it-is-finished-paid-in-full/>