

Forgive Us Our Debts

When the subprime lending crisis punctured the real estate bubble, the resulting explosion left thousands of Americans upside down on their mortgages. During the boom, first-time buyers slid into homes for a median two percent down then leveraged more capital than the house was worth to cover their closing costs. When an overheated economy finally seized up, interest on these variable-rate arrangements soared, payments went stratospheric, and people found themselves stuck with dwellings they could neither pay for nor sell.

Enter You Walk Away, a San Diego firm that, for a grand, lets a buyer bail on a mortgage before it flames out. The company, less than a half year old, boasts two hundred clients in six states. Borrowers don't lose their equity because they never had any. They can trade down to rent a cheaper property, keep financially afloat, and try again in a few years when their credit rating recovers.

What would it feel like just to walk away – to have the weight of the world, or at least a four-bedroom, two-bath ranch – slide from your shoulders?

"Forgive us," Jesus instructed Christians to pray, "our debts as we forgive our debtors." The Book of Common Prayer offers the option of substituting sins for that financial metaphor of salvation. We make that change because our society experiences debt mostly as an inconvenience and an embarrassment. Jesus wrote the original prayer because first century Jews experienced debt as a living death.

Sharecropping small plots while paying outrageous Roman taxes – taxes aggravated by loan-sharking collection agents – drove many peasants into lifelong wage-slavery. Default on such debt often meant auctioning off one's offspring for the best offer in order to keep the family afloat. Failure to pay could ultimately mean the entire clan – even distant relatives and neighbors – sold south to settle the account. History tells of one village turned ghost town when all the occupants either went to the auction block or escaped to the surrounding hills.

Looked at in that light, "forgive us our debts" makes a lot of theological sense.

"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ," Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 8.9. And in case we don't know, he crunches the numbers: "that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor." To people for whom

poverty was no mere aggravation, this promise spoke with power: the cross shines as the currency by which Christ paid our debt. You Walk Away, the gospel declares, because he stepped in.

Of course, the Lord can never leave well enough alone. "As we forgive our debtors." That balancing clause demands that our walking away become a stepping in on its own right as forgiving becomes the currency of unconditional forgiveness. Those rescued from spiritual bankruptcy now find grace to say to others, "You walk away."

Indebted,
Doug