



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

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"Our Debts and Daily Wages"

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
on Sunday September 4, from Deut. 24:14-15 & Luke 11:1-13*

I know that it is Beatles Sunday, and we are basking in the genius of Lennon, Harrison, and McCartney. But this Labor Day weekend I've been thinking about the words of another great poet from my parent's generation, Billy Joel who sang:

Well, we're living here in Allentown
And they're closing all the factories down
Out in Bethlehem, they're killing time
Filling out forms, standing in line
Our fathers fought the Second World War
Spent their weekends on the Jersey Shore
Met our mothers at the USO
Asked them to dance, danced with them slow
And we're living here in Allentown
But the restlessness was handed down
And it's getting very hard to stay
Well, we're waiting here in Allentown
For the Pennsylvania we never found
For the promises our teachers gave
If we worked hard, if we behaved
So the graduations hang on the wall
But they never really helped us at all
No they never taught us what was real
Iron and coke, chromium steel
And we're waiting here in Allentown
But they've taken all the coal from the ground
And the union people crawled away;
Every child had a pretty good shot
To get at least as far as their old man got
But something happened
On the way to that place
They threw an American flag in our faceⁱ



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Billy Joel's 1982 *Nylon Curtain* album included many references to the disillusionment of the "American Dream;" but none so poignant as "Allentown," which became an anthem for blue collar America, representing the aspirations and frustrations of the American working class in the late 20th century. The subject of the song is the demise of the manufacturing industry. When Bethlehem Steel, one of the largest companies in the world, closed, a generation of people were left jobless and depressed, wanting to leave town but still clinging to the glory their parents achieved.

Ironically, just as this song was released, my parents moved to Bethlehem, with a wide-eyed and precocious toddler, looking to find their own piece of the American dream. My mother taught at Lehigh University and my father, a foundryman and pattern maker, opened a machine shop in Easton. They both worked insanely hard, while I went to school with the kids whose parents had lost their jobs at the steel factory and were struggling to provide for their families and rebuild their lives.

Growing up in Bethlehem in the 80s would be enough to open my mind about the precarity of the American Dream, but when I was 17, my mom accepted a teaching position at UNC Charlotte and we moved to (of all places in the world) Kannapolis, NC. As far as small towns go, there are a lot of things Bethlehem and Kannapolis have in common, but one I wasn't expecting was for the largest employer to shut down in my hometown again and lay off its entire work force. When Fieldcrest Cannon closed, the *Washington Post* reported, the town of Kannapolis unraveled. It was a very difficult time, and I witnessed the devastation; going to school and playing sports with the kids whose parents had lost their jobs at the mill. Many proud, skilled, third and fourth generation mill workers were now forced to apply for jobs at Wal-Mart.

We live in a divided America where people can't seem to agree on anything, but one of the few things almost every person in our society has in common, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, or religious affiliation is that they work. We are workers. With the exception of children who are future workers, retired Americans who are former workers, and people who cannot work and need our support, everyone else is a worker. If we provide caregiving for children or adults at home, even if it is unpaid, we are still most definitely workers. And there was a time, in American history, when workers, and the work they did, were treated with a sacred sense of dignity and respect, but sadly that has changed.



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I find it fascinating the very same year Billy Joel released his song about the closing of Bethlehem Steel, Pope John Paul II issued an encyclical called *Laborem exercens* "On Human Work," which begins with the famous line "Through work man must earn his daily bread."ⁱⁱ In this extraordinary document the Pope developed the argument that work is more than just an human activity or commodity, but an essential aspect of the nature of God and an integral part of what it means to be a human being made in God's image.

God worked for six days to bring all of creation into existence, created human beings in their likeness as workers and creators, and then on the seventh day, rested from their labors. There is something both indelibly human and intrinsically divine about work, and the Pope contended that both work and rest, are a sharing in the activity of God the Creator, a following in the footsteps of Jesus the carpenter and Paul the tentmaker.

He went on to claim that there are many factors in the modern world that have degraded the dignity of work and he argued that labor should take precedence over capital because people are more important than property. That's right, the Pope wrote that! He also asserted that the Church should offer its full and unwavering support for the rights of workers, specifically advocating for living wages, unions, the dignity of agricultural work, the rights disabled persons, and emigration. The Pope grounded this in an understanding that work is essential part of spirituality. I know it must be strange to hear a Baptist minister discuss a papal encyclical, but my guess is it might be even more odd to hear the idea that work is a spiritual activity. Today I fear many of us have lost the spirituality of work and no longer think about the labor we engage in as a holy endeavor. Even those of us whose work is to serve spiritual guides for religious institutions can still forget that all our labor is a spiritual activity.

How did we lose sight of the spirituality of work? During the Industrial Revolution, men left the farm and began working outside the home for the very first time; and because of this, a new gender ideology developed called the "Separate Spheres," "Cult of True Womanhood" or "Domesticity." It was a set of social standards placed on women in the late 19th century that understood there to be two spheres or realms in the world, the public and private. The public realm was the dirty, immoral, and competitive arena of work and politics, and the private realm was the pure, clean, pious, and moral place of home and church. In this ideology, men were to be engaged in the public realm of work and politics. But there was bad and difficult stuff going on out there, and what men need was a respite. So, women were supposed to provide a refuge for men from the dirty realm of work and politics, by creating safe spaces for them at home and at church.



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The problems this ideology created for women are obvious, and thankfully led them to fight for change, but the basic compartmentalization of public and private spheres still haunts us today. Work and politics remain separated in our minds from home and church, and the church was domesticated into a privatized realm of personal spirituality. There's nothing wrong with home and church being a refuge from the harsh industrialized world, but not if it is only a refuge for white men, or if being a refuge means certain topics cannot be discussed. A refuge is a space where people are welcomed, loved, cared for, and accepted, but also a space where we tell each other the truth, and discuss the difficult parts our everyday lives. Otherwise, our safe "refuge" becomes nothing more than a façade for silence and oppression.

The first-century world of Jesus and the gospels did not have separate spheres ideology, but we still do, and it has had a massive impact on the way we read the Bible, understand the teachings of Jesus, how we worship and even how we pray. In fact, the meaning of the Lord's Prayer from our text today, the most famous and often recited prayer in Western history, has been obscured by this dualism and the anemic individualistic spirituality that is a hangover from separate spheres ideology. Most Christians can recite the Lord's Prayer from memory and this familiarity means the prayer can provide us great comfort in times of trouble. Yet it has also caused this prayer to become somewhat rote, irrelevant, and meaningless for our everyday lives—segregated into the sphere of personal piety and devotion and abstracted from the real world of work and politics.

Jesus offered this prayer to his disciples who said, "Lord, teach us to pray," but we often forget the disciples were workers—fishermen, tax collectors, day laborers, shepherds, and sex workers. In response to their request, Jesus not only provided them a model of how to pray and what to pray for—but a prayer for workers and for a kingdom economy that worked for all people. It was a prayer for the year of Jubilee, which Jesus stated as his mission in Luke 4 to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight for the blind, and freedom from oppression. It was a call for the provisions in Leviticus 25—the feeding of the hungry, forgiveness of debts, and the redistribution of property and wealth. It was prayer for the birth of completely new form of economic relationships between all people.

"Give us each day our daily bread," seems like a simple request for daily nourishment, but the word here translated as "daily" was the same as the Latin word which referred to the daily ration Romans issued to slaves, soldiers, and workers. Most people in the first century were not paid with currency but "rations;" a measured-out allowance of food per day. They literally were paid in bread. Bread was their wages, which is why we still use phrases like "bread-winner" today.



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When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Give us each day our daily bread” he was really saying, “Give us each day our daily wages,” which significantly expands the economic significance of the prayer because it means Jesus was concerned not only that workers should be paid fair wages, but that if workers are not being paid their fair wages, they should pray for it and demand it, because prayer is not just something we do with our minds and mouths, but with our hands and feet.

I recently heard the story of a coal miner named Braxton Wright who works at the Warrior Met coal mine in Brookwood AL. Five years ago, he and other workers were promised that if they worked more hours with less pay, less staff, and less time off that when the time came for their next contract the coal company would make it up to them and compensate them for their sacrifice.

But when the negotiations came in 2020, Warrior Met coal said they’d never made that promise and refused to repay the miners even after they’d worked shorthanded through COVID as essential workers in what is one of the deadliest jobs in America. So, on April 1, 2022, Braxton and the other miners started now one of the longest strikes in recent history. When interviewed by *The New York Times* Braxton described his frustrations with the American political system—feeling dismissed by democrats, betrayed by republicans, and abandoned by both political parties in the coal workers struggle for dignity and respect—as they fight to receive their daily bread.

What about the church? What is our relationship to the average worker? Do we support their struggle for dignity and respect—for their right to receive their daily bread? When we pray the Lord’s Prayer, do we pray for workers in America and around the world to receive fair wages? Despite Jesus’s teachings and the Pope’s encyclical, throughout American history churches and church leaders have found themselves heavily on the side of owners instead of workers. In *Millhands and Preachers* Liston Pope tells the story of nearby Gastonia where pastors aligned themselves with the textile mills against the livelihood of the workers in their pews. Even more close to home, the book *Struggle for the Soul of the Post-war South* shows how that our first Senior Minister, Dr. George Heaton, worked diligently on behalf of industry owners to break up unions and called for “overthrowing the fetish of collective bargaining,” which he thought was fundamentally “divisive and un-Christian.”

However, America has changed dramatically since 1944 and I believe Heaton could not have imagined a 40-year period of wage stagnation where productivity would increase by 74% but worker’s compensation grew by only 9%. He could not have possibly anticipated the way neoliberalism has dramatically transformed American industry, limiting the rights and dignity of workers.



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He would never have envisioned a world where CEOs makes 300 times more than the average worker, and I believe if Dr. Heaton were alive today, he would stand on the side of the worker against owners or policies that refuse to increase the minimum wage, erode collective bargaining, and decimate union membership. Unlike the post-War period of 1944, the average worker today receives less daily bread than the generations who came before them, and this has led people of faith and good conscience to believe that raising wages is the central moral imperative of our age.

But there is another spiritual task that is equally important. As a young Methodist, I was raised to pray for the forgiveness of my trespasses. Some of you may have been taught to pray for the forgiveness of your sins or debts if you happened to be Presbyterian. But curiously, the word "trespasses" does not appear in the gospels. In Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer it says, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" and in Luke it says, "forgive us our sins as we forgive our debtors."

Debts was always primary word here, yet interestingly we seem to interpret it on a solely individual and non-economic basis. Forgiveness is an important spiritual concept, and we know that beloved community is impossible without it—but our relationships have an economic dimension and Jesus was telling his disciples that no one should live indebted to another person. It creates a hierarchical power dynamic of master and servant that is ripe for domination and oppression. Instead, when we pray, he said we should ask for the forgiveness of all our debts (financial and otherwise) and grant forgiveness to anyone who is indebted to us.

You're not going to find this advice on the front page of the Wall Street Journal, but the recent discussion about Student Loan Forgiveness has elevated the issue of debt to the surface of our social conversation again. Our debts and daily bread are connected. The lack of fair wages over the last 40 years has plunged millions of Americans into crisis. In many cases, even an increase in wages won't make up for the mounting debt so many Americans are carrying. The negative reaction many had to slightly loosening the millstone around the neck of millions of people stems from an ancient belief that is as old as civilization itself; the belief that all debt is sin and therefore must be repaid.

A few years ago, I discovered the work of British economist Michael Hudson and was stunned to learn that in most ancient societies "sin" and "debt" are exact the same word, which means for most cultures in history sin and debt were the same thing. Debt was sin and sin was debt. One was not moral and other financial, they were always both, which is why it was so radical that in the first century world Jesus said he came to forgive sins and cancel debts.



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He came to free us from both! No wonder the Pharisees said, “Who are you to forgive people’s sins?” Jesus did not believe that debt was sacred, but that people were sacred. He did not believe in the sanctity of debt but the sanctity of workers. He came to free all of us from the chains of an economic way of life that creates a society of “haves” and “have nots” instead of a beloved community of love, equality, and peace.

When we pray “give us our daily bread” and “forgive us our debts” we are praying for a world where no one goes hungry, and no one is enslaved by financial burdens. When we pray “give us our daily bread” and “forgive us our debts” we are praying for a world where everyone receives fair wages and where everyone gets a second chance for freedom. When we pray “give us our daily bread” and “forgive us our debts” we are praying for workers’ rights and for Jubilee. When we pray “give us our daily bread” and “forgive us our debts” we are praying for a new economy of abundant life and material grace. When we pray “give us our daily bread” and “forgive us our debts” we are praying for a world where workers and the work they do have sacred dignity and respect.

Today is Labor Sunday, a day to elevate workers, celebrate their contributions to our society, and to support their struggles for freedom from all indignities and inhumanities, large and small, that cripple their spirit and hinder their journey to greater wholeness and joy. It is also a day for us as the church to recommit ourselves to the fight for fair wages and freedom from the crushing weight of mounting debt—and to do so in the name of Jesus!

If we do this then, as the poet Pablo Neruda wrote, “life itself will have the shape of bread, deep and simple, immeasurable, and pure. Every living thing will have its share of soil and life, and the bread we eat each morning, everyone’s daily bread, will be hallowed and sacred, because it will have been won by the longest and costliest of human struggles.”ⁱⁱⁱ So let us pray with mind and mouth, hands and feet, our Creator who is in the Universe, sacred is your name. Your beloved community come; your will be done on Earth as in the universe. Give us each day our daily wages and forgive us our debts as we forgive those indebted to us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For yours is the kingdom now and forever. Amen

ⁱ Billy Joel, “Allentown,” 1982.

ⁱⁱ *Laborem exercens*, John Paul II.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pablo Neruda, “Ode to Bread.”