

ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF CORPORATE OPPRESSION OF THE VULNERABLE

Contributed by Jim Jordal
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Woe unto them who enact evil statutes, and to those who constantly record unjust decisions, so as to deprive the needy of justice, and rob the poor of My people of their rights, in order that widows may be their spoil, and that they may plunder the orphans.

Isaiah 10:1-2 (NASB)

Cry loudly, do not hold back; raise your voice like a trumpet, and declare to My people their transgression, and to the house of Jacob their sin.

Isaiah 59:1 (NASB)

Housing columnist Kenneth Harney's article, "Couple's reverse mortgage went coldly awry," in the Housing section of the Minneapolis Star Tribune for May 13, 2006 reveals the oppressive account of a 94-year-old New Jersey widow snared by predatory (but legal) lending practices of a \$2.2 billion federally-regulated bank.

It seems that in 1988 the widow and her then-living husband took out a "reverse mortgage." In this case the lending company agreed to pay them \$312 monthly with the stipulation that it could recover its principal plus accrued interest from the eventual sale of the property. The problem arose from a clause buried deep in the contract giving the lender claim to 100 percent of any appreciation in the value of the property from the inception of the loan agreement until its termination.

The property in question did appreciate--from an assessed valuation of \$83,500 in 1988 to about \$500,000 today. Now the widow wants to pay off the loan and cash out her equity to help pay her nursing home expenses. But the widow has no equity, since the lender now asserts its claim to all appreciation (which it calls "extra interest"), plus its principal advances of \$67,000, plus accrued compound interest at 11.2 percent of another \$158,000. Were it not for a "cap" of \$500,000 (the current appraised value of the home), on the bank's share at the time of sale, the widow would now owe \$642,000. As it is, she has no remaining equity, and no recourse since the bank is operating within the law.

This is why the Bible prohibits usury (interest), and reserves special condemnation for those who "devise evil by law," and who "decree unrighteous decrees…that they may rob the needy of justice…that widows may be their prey…" God hates oppression and pronounces judgment upon those who oppress, especially those who create legal oppression through manipulation of the law-making process.

You might guess that heartless and oppressive laws originate as business people greedy for increasing profits submit a law written by their henchmen for passage by compliant legislators made amenable to such robbery by campaign contributions and lobbying pressures. That's the way it usually happens. The power of special interest groups to influence legislation in favor of the rich and powerful is now out of control. Congress no longer represents common people, but those who pay legislator's campaign expenses and provide special perks for those holding office. Recent polls indicate that only 23 percent of voters have confidence that congress will do its job correctly, and the gridlock created by partisan politics and the corruption engendered by special interest group influence is perhaps the main reason.

So what can you do about abusive laws that discriminate against the most vulnerable groups of society? One thing you can do is to read the small print in any agreement you sign. Manipulators take advantage of the fact that trusting people think everyone else is as honest as they are--which is decidedly not true. Watch what you sign, especially if it's a financial document obligating you to do anything, or promising any benefit to you. Another action you can take is to protest loudly when something like this happens to you. Most people say, "Well, it's only a few dollars, and it won't make or break me, so I won't say anything." But in so doing you allow the abuse to continue, and the next person victimized might be for much more than a few dollars. You might consider that the "principle" of the thing more important than the actual dollars involved.

But what seems most lacking today is advocacy against those corrupt, abusive, and --yes, legal--systems creating suffering for the vulnerable of society. We're almost endlessly willing to provide charity for the needy, but somewhat less willing to advocate openly for their cause. But until advocacy for justice becomes a priority of the Christian church, I see little chance of the situation changing significantly.

God hates injustice, and so should we. So let's do as He says and begin to raise our voices, as did the prophets, against injustice wherever and whenever it appears. How can Christians do less?