

THE PARABLE OF THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT

Intro: Early on in Jesus' ministry, His teaching seems to have been rather straight-forward and literal; but as time went on and as opposition increased, He changed his message to reveal truth to those who were willing to hear and to obscure it from those who would not hear. Jesus started teaching in parables.

To the prejudiced they seemed foolish and insignificant; but to the honest and good people of Palestine they were windows into the kingdom of God. Jesus one occasion used a parable to instruct his disciples about forgiveness. Let's turn to Mt. 18.

THE OCCASION OF THIS PARABLE

Jesus that day had talked of relationships with others, especially among those in the kingdom.

He urged his disciples to be humble toward one another (Mt. 18:1-6). He warned of the danger of causing others to stumble (Mt. 18:7-11), stressing the strong desire the Father has that none of His children should perish (Mt. 18:12-14).

That in turn led to the need then to restore the erring; and Jesus proceeded to give definite steps to accomplish that, and assured us that He would be with them in those efforts (Mt. 18:15-20).

All of this got Peter thinking about the repeat offender.

Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" (Matthew 18:21)

Peter's proposal may have seemed to him generous. Many commentators point to a rabbinical tractate that says: "If a man commits a transgression, the first, second and third time he is forgiven, the fourth time he is not forgiven" (*Yoma* 86b)¹

Yet Jesus considered Peter's proposal quite off the mark. His response: *"Jesus *said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven." (Matthew 18:22)*

Scholars point out that the words in Greek can simply mean "seventy seven." But whether 77 or 490 the point is the same. Forgiveness is unlimited.

But how would Jesus help his disciples to see why they should respond with such compassion to those who wrong them and repent? He told Peter a parable, a story to illustrate the motives for forgiveness and the consequences of a lack of forgiveness. It is commonly called the parable of the unmerciful servant.

THE DETAILS OF THE PARABLE

¹ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 471). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

“*For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a certain king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.*” (Matthew 18:23)

The kingdom of heaven is likened unto is a phrase frequent in the parables which in essence says, "Some principle of God's rule is being illustrated in this story." In this story what is being illustrated is the attitudes people have toward one another in dealing with the wrongs of others and God's response to them.

A king purposes to settle accounts or bring them to account for their service. In this case, we become aware that these servants are not common household slaves, but administrators of the king. They are apparently either princes or people contracted to collect taxes.

And when he had begun to settle them, there was brought to him one who owed him ten thousand talents.” (Matthew 18:24)

When the disciples heard the amount, perhaps a smile of amusement came across the face of the disciples as they listened. 10,000 talents??!! That would be an eye-popping number.

Both the sum (ten thousand) and the monetary unit (talent) are significant, for in the ancient Near East ten thousand was the highest number used in calculations, and the talent was the largest currency unit of that time. In other words, the amount is intended to stagger the imagination; it is the highest sum imaginable, to be contrasted with the trifling amount of the debt in verse 28.²

According to Josephus (*Ant.* 17.11.4 §317–20) only 600 talents in taxes were collected from all of Judea, Idumea, and Samaria in 4 B.C.³ The number was so outrageous that some translators thought it was a mistake in the manuscript and changed it to a more “reasonable” wording like “many” or “a hundred.” The hyperbole is intentional! Some modern footnotes suggest that it was worth \$10,000,000 in silver, but much more in buying power!

But what Jesus wants his disciples to consider is the fact that debt of this man was incredibly huge—beyond any conceivable means of repaying.

But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. (Mt. 18:25)

And no means to repay! (an incredible understatement!) In view of the immensity of the debt this could only be considered a punishment for malfeasance and not a legitimate means of recovering what had been lost.

Yet look at his response of the servant when called to account:

² Newman, B. M., & Stine, P. C. (1992). *A handbook on the Gospel of Matthew* (p. 578). New York: United Bible Societies.

³ Hagner, D. A. (1998). *Matthew 14–28* (Vol. 33B, p. 538). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

“The slave therefore falling down, prostrated himself before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything.’” (Matthew 18:25–26)

The man prostrates himself before his lord, apparently face to the ground. The slave pleads not for forgiveness, but for his lord’s patience or long-suffering. He intends to pay back everything.

However could the servant have dreamed what would happen next?

And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. (Matthew 18:27)

He receives an astounding pardon! He is freed from incarceration; he is forgiven the debt that he owed. Sheer grace is at work here!

But could we have expected what Jesus next reveals?:

But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ “So his fellow slave fell down and began to entreat him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you.’ “He was unwilling however, but went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed.” (Matthew 18:28–30)

This forgiven slave confronts a fellow-slave. The debt was a hundred denarii (a little over 3 month’s pay). He seizes him and begins to choke him, demanding repayment. Interestingly this fellow-servant pleads with virtually the same words his creditor had used with the king he owed, “Have patience with me and I will repay it.” However in this case the plea for patience was rejected; and there was no compassion toward the debtor. Instead he was thrown into prison until repayment was made.

So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened.” (Matthew 18:31)

His reaction is swift and decisive:

*Then summoning him, his lord *said to him, ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you entreated me. ‘Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?’ “And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him.” (Matthew 18:32–34)*

Consider this: It took 6000 denarii to equal a single talent. Multiply that times 10,000 talents and you have a debt of 60,000,000 denarii. The man’s fellow-slave had owe him 100 denarii. He had been forgiven 600,000 times as much as his fellow-slave owed him. “All that debt” indeed!

And note the king’s question: It has the force in Greek of saying, “Was it not necessary for you to show mercy as I showed mercy to you?”

The lord then proceeds to return things as they ought to be rather than what he had graciously allowed them to be. The unforgiving slave’s pardon is revoked and he is cast into prison to stay until death!

THE PURPOSE OF THE PARABLE

The following three themes emerge from the main characters and episodes of the parable: God's boundless grace, the absurdity of spurning that grace, and the frightful fate awaiting the unforgiving.

First we need to recognize where we stand with God.

It is not coincidental that the first debt is described as 10,000 talents. It is a picture of the relationship we all have with God because of our sin. We are helplessly and hopelessly in debt before Him because of our sins.

"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," (Romans 3:23)

"For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." (Romans 5:6)

In Scripture the forgiveness of sins is often couched in the language of debts forgiven (release and cancellation). Thanks be to God Jesus paid it all! God has mercifully and compassionately forgiven us!

Second we need to recognize the forgiveness we owe our fellow-man.

When we read that parable. Do you see yourself? It is one thing to be told a truth, and quite another to hear a brilliant short story in which you side with the underdog and then find yourself accusing not the man in the story but yourself!

It is basically to say, when we understand the nature of God's forgiveness, then we will enter the kingdom and be forgiving people ourselves. It is not only the answer to Peter's question, "How many times?" It supplies the motivation to grant that forgiveness again and again.

As long as a person repents and seeks our forgiveness, it is necessary for us to forgive them! And that attitude should always prevail, growing out of our own forgiveness by God to be ready to forgive the wrong.

Counselors often discover that a client's unwillingness to forgive someone lies deep at the heart of all kinds of personal problems.⁴ Hidden grievances and unwillingness to forgive are two things that make shipwreck of personal relations.⁵

In a sense this final parable is the culmination of a series of principles that govern how we relate to others in the kingdom. Consider them: 1) humility like a child; 2) welcoming one another; 3) wholeheartedness; 4) pastoral care; 5) openness; 6) forgiveness; 7) freedom from resentment.

Third we must recognize the consequences of a lack of forgiveness!

So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart. '" (Matthew 18:35)

⁴ Blomberg, C. (1992). *Matthew* (Vol. 22, p. 285). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

⁵ Green, M. (2001). *The message of Matthew: the kingdom of heaven* (p. 198). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Does Jesus mean to say that we will be like the servant thrown into prison and tortured forever? Probably not! He is thinking of the revocation of our freedom from sin. As Jesus said in other places: *“For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. “But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.”* (Matthew 6:14–15) If we do not forgive, we will not receive the forgiveness of God. This puts all the wrongs of others in a new perspective. What wrong has another committed against you that you are willing to go to hell over?!!! Surely there has not been anything that bad that we could not gladly forgive one who has repented! And desire to forgive one who has not yet repented!

Conclusion: Such is the attitude of those in the kingdom of God. “Conduct in the community of disciples called “the church” is to be patterned after the mercy and grace of God’s free forgiveness of sins—which is an important basis for the very existence of the community. As God freely forgives those who have sinned against him, so are disciples to freely forgive those who sin against them.”

Do you see these three truths? Have you acted upon them?