

The Parables of Jesus

The Unforgiving Servant

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I want to look at this text (Matt 18) under five headings: the introduction in vv.21-22, then there are three scenes: the first in vv.23-27, the second in vv.28-31, and the third in vv.32-34. Jesus' conclusion, our fifth heading is in v.35. So, *intro, three scenes, and conclusion. First, the introduction:*

I. Introduction

Just prior to our text this morning in Matthew 18, up in verses 15-20, Jesus gives the well-known instructions on how to handle sin in the church. You remember: if your brother sins against you go to him in private, if he listens to you, you have won your brother. If not, then take one or two others, if he won't listen to them, tell it to the church, and if he ignores the church, remove him from the fellowship.

It may be that the first step in this process, the one where your brother sins and you go to him, he repents, and the relationship is restored. It may be that this step has provoked a question in Peter's mind. The question would be something like: "well, how many times would I have to do this step one and forgive my brother." There was a rabbinical teaching current which said you must forgive your brother 3 times, after that, on the fourth offense, there is no forgiveness for him.

So, Peter, thinking he's being magnanimous, decides to show Jesus what a large-hearted and generous guy he is. He will propose forgiving his brother seven times. This is what he asks in v.21: Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times? Jesus is underwhelmed. He says, I tell you not seven times, but 77 times (some: 70x7). It's more likely that this should read seventy-seven times, not seventy times seven. That is 77, not 490. The reason for this is that this text has an echo back to Gen 4 where we have another escalation from 7 to 77. There, the bloodthirsty Lamech says: if Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is 77 fold.

Jesus is doing a couple of things here. First, He is saying that the disciple must be as extravagant in forgiving as Lamech was in taking vengeance. But he means even more. 77 is 7x10, two numbers of completion and wholeness. Plus

another 7. The idea here is of superabundant fullness. This is the language of hyperbole and not of mathematical precision.

The whole problem with Peter's question is that he is a counter, a tabulator; he has a mental accountant working his forgiveness balance sheet. The difference between Jesus' reply and Peter's question is not quantitative – its not 77-7. It's qualitative. The two are moving in different orbits. Peter counts, Jesus forbids counting. For Jesus forgiveness is never to be withheld. To read Jesus' response and ask: ok, so 77 times, does that mean the 78th time I don't have to forgive – to ask that is to make the same mistake as Peter.

Let me try and clarify something which might crop up right here. There is a parallel passage to this exchange between Peter and Jesus in Luke's gospel. And from that parallel we know that this discussion is about forgiving people *who repent*. People who refuse to repent are not in view in our exchange between Jesus and Peter. Also, it is clear from verses on church discipline just prior to our text, that unrepentant people can be disciplined and removed from the church.

So, when I say that Jesus is teaching that forgiveness is to be limitless – I believe the context leads us to take this to be true where there is repentance. The parable itself will make it clear that even God's forgiveness is not absolutely unqualified.

But these sorts of questions – what about this case, what about someone who does this, what are the boundary conditions – interesting as they are, can distract us from the point. Jesus is saying to Peter: forgiveness is never to be withheld when it is sought. You need to stop setting an upper limit. Now, this seventy seven times pronouncement of Jesus would be an absolute shock to Peter and to Jesus' audience. It makes him sound like he came out of some crazy liberal rabbinical school. Thus, the parable is needed for further explanation. That is the introduction.

II. Three Scenes

The parable proper and the first scene start in v.23.

First Scene

The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. In v.24 one such servant is brought to the master who owed him ten thousand talents. A talent was the largest denomination of currency, and it was measured in metal. Ten thousand is the biggest number we have a single Greek word for. So this is a very, very large sum and it is intentionally exaggerated for effect here. While there is not absolute precision about these things, a talent was about twenty years pay for a day-laborer; for a minimum wage job. So ten

thousand talents is 200,000 years pay for a day-laborer. It is estimated at 300 metric tons of silver.

To give you an idea of how much money this is, Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, tells us that Herod collected 900 talents annually in tax revenue for this whole region. So ten thousand talents is an astronomical sum. And the point is simple: the debt is impossible to pay back. And in v.25 we see that the servant couldn't pay, so the master orders that he, his family, and all his possessions, be sold and payment be made. Selling oneself into slavery (or in this case being sold) for excessive debt-relief was not uncommon in the ancient world.

But here its clear that this would do virtually nothing for the master as far as obtaining the huge debt he is owed. The servant, quite unrealistically, in v.26, says "be patient with me and I will pay back everything.' This poor guy asks for more time and, while his desire to make it right is commendable, he is in a situation where he would need thousands of years.

We see the astonishing response of the master in v.27: He had pity on him. The word here is the word often translated as compassion. And it is out of this boundless wellspring of compassion that the master far exceeds the servant's wildest dreams. He releases him from slavery AND forgives the enormous debt.

The Jubilee year, the favorable year of the Lord, has come in Jesus' ministry of forgiveness. This is the absolute prodigal, promiscuous grace of God. And this goes right back to Peter's bookkeeper mentality. God has forgiven you infinitely more than you will ever be called upon to forgive another person. And it is with that realization that all questions of forgiveness must be permeated.

Second Scene

The second scene, between the forgiven servant and one of his fellow servants begins in v.28. The forgiven servant finds a fellow servant who owed him a hundred denarii. This is not insignificant in itself. It's about a hundred day's minimum wage. But, and this is the key point here, it is about one six-hundred-thousandth of what he owed his master.

The point is clear: what he is owed is insignificant in the light of the personal Jubilee he has just received from the master. And we are meant to see the sheer absurdity, the absurdity of compassion spurned, in what happens next. He seizes his fellow servant, and begins to choke him saying 'pay back what you owe me.'

In v.29 the servant falls down and pleads with him in words virtually identical to the plea that the first servant made to the master: 'be patient with me and I will pay you back.' The redundant plea is meant to make us feel the horror of what is going on here. This plea for patience *is actually reasonable*. With some time and

patience this debt COULD easily be repaid. Unlike the first servant whose plea was groundless.

But his attitude is one of strict justice. He is not the king so he can't sell the man into slavery, but he can, and does, in v.30, have him thrown into a debtor's prison until he pays. And, hey, he is within his rights to do this. There is nothing illegal about it. He wants his money and he is going to get it.

In v.31 some fellow servants, who had obviously heard the story of the king's stunning generosity toward the first servant, went and reported to the master all that had taken place.

Third Scene

The third scene, between the master and the first servant, begins in v.32. The master summons him and emphatically says: you wicked servant! I cancelled ALL that debt of yours – that astronomical debt – because you begged me to.

....and *should not* you – this is the language of necessity – it's not a nice gesture on our part to forgive others, it is a demand – a demand which, when unheeded, provokes the fiercest divine response. v.33: Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had on you? Mercy here is perfectly coherent with justice. It is what is REQUIRED. Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy.

Let me point out here that we should not miss that this is an ECONOMIC parable. And the sort of forgiveness called for here can often have costly economic consequences. I was recently asked by a friend for some advice on a situation where he was in an economic venture with some Christians who he felt had clearly defrauded him out of a large sum of money. He knew he could not bring them to the civil courts and he did not want to. But since they were in different churches he had no recourse to the church courts. And, in this case, the other parties refused to admit their wrongdoing. My friend may be left with no options but to eat the loss.

Now, as I said, this parable does not have a situation in view where forgiveness is extended without repentance. But, let me briefly address that since it is, sadly, often the case. While I don't want to quibble about words, technically my friend cannot simply forgive these people. Forgiveness implies a restoration of a loving, trusting, reconciled relationship. With that caveat however, the demands on my friend are just as great. Because of what God has done for Him in Christ, forgiving his enormous debt, he is not allowed to hate these brethren. He cannot harbor bitterness or anger. He is to love them and pray for them and commend them to God's mercy.

We may not want to call this forgiveness but it places much the same, if not more difficult, demands on us. Jesus calls us to love our enemies, to even pray for our persecutors. He never says “forgive” your enemies to be sure, but the inner substance, the readiness to forgive, with the requirement to seek the well-being of those who’ve harmed us, remains. We are to pray for the Lord’s mercy on those who remain unrepentant of the wrongs they’ve done to us. In that way we are in accord with the deeper attitudes this text is trying to inculcate in us.

As the servant in this parable is about to find out: judgment will be merciless to those who have shown no mercy (Jas 2:13). In v.34, the enraged master delivers the unforgiving servant to the jailers. The word for jailers is torturers. A well known – and brutal – fact of life in the ancient world was that the powerful, like Herod, had torturers which were used to try and extract debts. Here the servants’ prior forgiveness is rescinded and he is remanded to the torturers until he should pay all the debt – and it’s clear he cannot pay – so the punishment here is something of a picture of eternal judgment.

A couple of points are in order. The parables are not equations and not every aspect of the king here is meant to mirror God exactly. Parables are analogies and, as we’ve seen, that means A is like B in a certain way, but not in all ways. God does not have torturers. He doesn’t need to be informed by servants about this misdeed. But, the main point is clear and dreadful enough: a terrible fate awaits those who are unforgiving.

Nor are the parables systematic theologies. This text, if it was all we had, could lead one to assert that one can be forgiven and then lose that forgiveness. We would deny that on the basis of other texts. Even here it is clear that this servant has not appropriated the unbelievable reality of his own forgiveness in any meaningful way. But that is not Jesus’ concern here.

We need to address something else here. Any reader can feel something of the tension between the prodigal, beneficent, gracious God who forgives the incalculable debt, and the actions of the master in delivering the man over to the torturers to pay his un-payable debt off. One scholar puts this very well I think: God does not demand his pound – but He does insist on the integrity of His mercy. What is happening here is that God is giving the unforgiving servant what he wants. He wants to stand on his rights. God will let him stand on his rights. God doesn’t ask him to release his debtor. He simply applies the same measure or standard to him. As Jesus put it earlier in this gospel: with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.

Think about this for a second. What would you like God to do? Forgive the unforgiveness of this man? That would make God immoral. The refusal to show mercy is contrary to the character God **REQUIRES** of His people. Perhaps an example will help: Your son torches half your house, blows your cars up,

commits identity theft and steals your life savings. In mercy and compassion you forgive him when he pleads with you. Five minutes later he's in his sister's room beating and choking her because she ruined one of his baseball cards. What kind of parent would simply overlook this? You would probably do something analogous to what the master does here. You would make the son work to pay of his debt. He has clearly not learned the value of your forgiveness.

III. Conclusion

Finally, we get Jesus' summation in v.35: So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother from your heart. Beloved, there are things without which you will not be saved. Faith is the primary thing. But true faith, a true grasp of the enormity of what God has done for us in Christ, requires that we forgive our brethren. God will not forgive your lack of forgiveness. It doesn't mean you are saved by works, it means you are not saved without good works and chiefly, without forgiveness.

Do you have anyone you have not forgiven? Let me say this: our response to offenses, real, hard offenses, is a tool for self-diagnosis. It is a barometer for your eternal soul. Your destiny is tied up with forgiving one another. If Corrie Ten Boom can forgive the German prison guard who held her in a concentration camp – and she did, when years later he asked her to, then surely, by God's grace we can forgive our much lighter offenses.

And notice this is not formal, at a distance, forgiveness. Jesus says forgive from the heart. He won't let us remain in some safe cold distance, keeping the offender at bay for some slight or offense. He requires mercy. He requires reconciliation. There are no commands to show mercy with moderation. God in Christ has lavished pardon on us for all our heinous debts – let us imitate Him and forgive one another from the heart - for our salvation depends on it. Amen.

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