

The Unforgiving Servant

Written by Dr. John E. Russell Sr -

Part II: Parables of the Kingdom

11. The Unforgiving Servant

Introduction

This parable was precipitated by Peter's question to Jesus,

"... Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times? Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

Matthew 18:21-23, NIV

Jesus then presents the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. This parable is found only in Matthew 18:23-35.

The Story

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"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king, who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

"The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' He demanded.

"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'

"But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Matthew 18:23-35, NIV

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The story begins with a king settling accounts with his servants. One servant who owed him 10,000 talents was brought before him. The Roman talent was a weight measurement that equals 71 pounds US. Therefore, 71 pounds of gold is \$1,252,100.75, based on the current spot gold price of gold \$1,209.30 (8 January 2015). His total debt was $\$1,252,100.75 \times 10,000 = \$12,521,007,500$ (assuming this to be a troy pound):

There are approximately 14.583 troy ounces in an avoirdupois pound. Precious metals are always quoted in troy ounces (31.1 grams), as apposed to the standard avoirdupois ounce of 28 grams.

<http://onlygold.com/Info/Value-Your-Weight-In-Gold.asp>

Since the servant was unable to repay 12.5 billion dollars, the king ordered that he and his family be sold as slaves and all that he had be sold to pay on the debt. The servant fell down before his king and begged him to be patient until he could repay him. The king had mercy on him, forgave the debt and let him go.

The forgiven servant went out and found a fellow servant who owed him 100 denarii (\$5,800). He grabbed him, began choking him and demanded that he pay him the relatively small sum. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him to be patient until he could repay him.

The forgiven servant refused to wait and had his fellow servant thrown into prison until the debt was paid.

Other fellow servants saw what had happened and told the king.

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The king called in his wicked servant for not having mercy and canceling the insignificant debt as the king had canceled his astronomical debt. The king was furious and had him turned over to jailers to be tortured until his debt was paid.

The Interpretation

The story characters and the real people they represent are:

1. The king: God
2. The servants: believers

The debts and what they represent are:

3. The 12,521,007,500 USD: our debt of sin to God.
4. The 5,8000 USD: the debt of wrong done to us by others.

Peter probably felt he was being generous in offering to forgive someone 7 times. (Two Rabbis of that time had taught not to forgive more than 3 times). Jesus replied that we should forgive 77

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times, or it could be translated $70 \times 7 = 490$ times.

Jesus was using a literal figure to represent the Christian *attitude* of forgiving others.

In this parable, the unforgiving servant was probably a thief:

This one *was brought unto him*; he never would have come of himself; he would have made that ten into twenty thousand, for the secure sinner goes on treasuring up (Rom. ii 5) an even mightier sum, to be one day required of him. In all probability, from the immensity of the debt, this man was one to whom some chief post of honor and dignity in the kingdom had been committed—a satrap who should have remitted the revenues of his province to the royal treasury.

Trench 1948, 56

The king could have been an actual oriental monarch and if so, the figure would have been appropriate. Or, Jesus could have been using hyperbole. *Jesus was actually emphasizing the utter hopelessness of our ever paying the immeasurable debt of sin that we owe. Only God can forgive our individual debt of sin.*

The custom of the day was to sell one's wife and children into slavery to help satisfy debts.

Another practice was to have debtors jailed and tortured to reveal any hidden sources of revenue.

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Tasker 1976, 179

Barclay sees these lessons:

1. A man must forgive in order to be forgiven:

Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy.

Matthew 5:7, NIV

Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!

James 2:12-13, NIV

2. There is a tremendous contrast between the debts in the parable. The smaller debt could be carried in one pocket. The larger debt would take an army of 8,600 carriers, each carrying 60 pounds of money—at a distance of one yard apart the carriers would form a line 5 miles long! We have been forgiven a debt beyond our ability to pay. It was paid by the death of God's own Son. Therefore we must forgive others as God has forgiven others, or we can hope to find no mercy.

Barclay 1958, *Matthew*, 212 ff.

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Jesus taught the model prayer to his disciples and added another teaching:

"This, then, is how you should pray: "'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.' For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."

Matthew 6:9-15

Again, Jesus taught about faith and added,

"Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them.

Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

Mark 11:23-25, NIV

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Central Truth

We must forgive others

As God has forgiven us

Or we will not be forgiven.

Conclusion

Thank God for his grace and forgiveness. Let us ask God to search our hearts and reveal all unforgiveness and grudges. Then, let us forgive everyone and give up all grudges.

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Some have said, "I just can't forgive so-and-so for what he did to me." Keep in mind that forgiving someone is a *decision*, not some emotion. Jesus would never said to forgive people if we could not forgive them! Simply forgive those who have wronged us. Then Jesus tells us to pray for our enemies:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Matthew 5:43-48, NIV

Concerning "hurt feelings," pray for people who wrong us. Give those people a gift—it will transform your hate to love! Dr. McMillen, who served as a medical missionary, says,

Do something good for your enemy and it will surprise you how much easier it is to love him. This is the Scripturally and psychologically sound method of changing our feelings.

McMillen 1967, 78

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If you recall, Jesus did this. He practiced what He preached. When He was giving the best gift the world ever received—*His life*—He *prayed* for those who crucified Him: ... "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."
... (Luke 23:34, NIV).

God's Word always works. It worked for me. My wife had been injured twice and I was angry. I considered suing the guilty party. Then, I obeyed the Lord. I forgave them. My thinking became more objective and clearer. I was set free.

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