

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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THE PARABLE OF THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT

Matthew 18:21-35

The Lord Jesus taught His followers not just to receive forgiveness but also to show such forgiveness. This point is at the heart of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. The story is recorded only in Matthew, Matthew 18:21-35. It goes like this.

There was a king who called his servants for an appointed day of accounting. One of them owed him 10,000 talents - a huge amount of money. What was the value of 10,000 talents? Well, one talent was equivalent to about 6,000 denarii. And one denarius was a day's wages in Jesus' time. Thus 10,000 talents was equivalent to 60 million working days! This, obviously, was no ordinary debt. It was far beyond what any individual might owe. The servant was perhaps a state official who mismanaged the kingdom's finances in some way and who is now being confronted by the king.

Since the man could not pay the 10,000 talents he owed, the king ordered that he be sold, along with his wife, his children and all his possessions. When the servant heard the verdict, he fell upon his knees before the king and begged for mercy. 'Be patient with me and I will pay back everything.' How he proposed to do that, we don't know. The fact of the matter is that he would need many lives to pay back his debt in its entirety.

The king's response was extraordinary. He took pity on the servant. He did not just give him extra time. He cancelled completely the debt, at great cost to himself, and let him go.

But the story does not end there.

After some time, this happy man ran into a fellow servant who owed him 100 denarii. Surprisingly, he grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment. One hundred denarii was a significant amount (some three or four months' wages), but it was nothing compared to the 10,000 talents he had been forgiven. The poor fellow servant also asked for time to pay. 'Be patient with me and I will repay,' he said. But the first servant refused to listen and had his debtor thrown into prison.

Other servants saw what had happened, and they were appalled. So they decided to inform the king. The king was so upset that this time, he turned the unforgiving servant to jailers to have him tortured until all of his original debt was paid. He said to him, 'You wicked servant, I cancelled your huge debt because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'

As you can tell, this parable has three distinct episodes: (1) the acquittal of the servant in debt; (2) his brutal treatment of a fellow debtor; (3) his imprisonment. Each episode contains one important lesson. Let us consider them one by one.

Episode 1: forgiveness

The theme of the first episode is forgiveness. This is easy to see when we understand the meaning of the three major symbols in the parable which are: the king, the servant and the debt of 10,000 talents.

Who does the king represent? The king represents God and pictures His role as judge. He is a person who 'settles accounts' (vv. 23, 24) with His slaves. We find the same picture of God in two other parables: the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30) and the Parable of the Shrewd Steward (Luke 16:1-13). In both instances, the king clearly symbolizes God. Notice also that our parable ends with these words: *So shall My heavenly Father also do to you...* The expression 'My heavenly Father' points directly to God. What the king did is what God (the heavenly Father) will do also.

Who does the servant represent? The servant represents a believer. Jesus told this parable in response to Peter's question in v. 21, *Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?* Notice the word 'brother' (*adelphos*), which refers to a Christian. This is the same word that Jesus used in v. 15 when He said, *And if your brother (adelphos) sins, go and reprove him in private.* There everybody agrees that Jesus was speaking about a brother in the church, a Christian. Believers are called brothers because they belong to the same redeemed family, having a common Father.

Moreover, remember that the servant in the parable mistreats a fellow-servant. If indeed the servant symbolizes a Christian, it then follows that the fellow servant symbolizes a fellow Christian, i.e., a brother. This is perfectly consistent with the closing verse of this parable. *So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.* The first servant did not forgive a fellow servant, his Christian brother.

What does the debt represent? Sin in the Bible is spoken of as a debt, as something that we owe to God. When Jesus taught His disciples to pray, *And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us* (Luke 11:4), the word 'indebted' clearly shows that sin is a debt.

Consider the context of this parable. It is told in response to the question of Peter regarding forgiveness. *Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?* To forgive a brother for his sin against us is to cancel the debt that he owes us. In the parable, the debt of the first servant is owed to the king, who represents God.

So the debt represents the debt of sin to God. Every time we sin, there goes to our spiritual account a debit which creates a debt. And our debt becomes bigger and bigger all the time. It becomes such that it is utterly out of control. That is the meaning of the 10,000-talent debt in the parable. Every human being is in such debt before God and there is no one who has the means to pay it.

'The wages of sin is death,' Paul says in Romans 6:23. This is another figure of speech which indicates that our debt to God is unpayable. When you are dead, you are gone for good. There is nothing that can buy you back from death.

For the servant in the story, the only thing left was that the king would be gracious to him. Notice his humble plea. V. 26: *The slave therefore falling down, prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything.'* This was an acknowledgement of the justice of the claim made against him, and a pious imploration of mercy.

What was the king's response? Seeing his distressed condition, the king was filled with compassion. He then released his servant and forgave him the whole debt. This represents the mercy of God to men.

We all have sinned. We owe to God more than could be paid. We are about to be cast off. If there is anything left of us, it is to come before God with a contrite heart and say to Him, 'Lord, I am a sinner. I realize that there is no way I can pay off my debt. I beg of you to have mercy upon me. Forgive me.' God will listen. And He is very ready, out of pure compassion, to forgive the sins of those who humble themselves before Him.

The first scene thus illustrates the boundless grace of God in forgiving sins, as the king forgave his servant.

We sometimes think that when the first act is over, when we have been pardoned, the whole drama is over. But this is not so. That is not salvation in its fullness. The forgiveness of sins, to be sure, is a major part of Jesus' message. But this forgiveness is only the beginning of the Christian life. The parable then moves to another scene which teaches the responsibility of the forgiven.

Episode 2: sanctification

The theme of the second episode is sanctification. It teaches that God's forgiveness of a person must be reflected in that person's forgiveness of others. He must show mercy.

Now, we cannot really understand mercy without talking about justice. Justice and mercy are two biblical concepts that cannot be treated separately. They are interrelated, as we can see from our parable. Jesus tells us that mercy does not eliminate justice, nor does justice nullify mercy. He teaches the application of both mercy and justice. Too often we perceive justice as the norm which must be applied rigorously, and mercy as an occasional abandonment of that norm. But the Lord instructs us to regard mercy and justice as equal norms.

If Jesus had not talked about the servant on his knees pleading for mercy and had only told the second episode of the story, with the man demanding a fellow servant to pay his debt, we would have said that justice prevailed even though the measure may have been harsh. There was a debt, no doubt about it. Legally speaking, the servant had every right to demand payment of those who owed him. But Jesus said, 'It is not just a matter of justice. You must have compassion and mercy.' The servant, however, would not forgive. He applied the principle of justice without mercy.

The shocking aspect of his behavior is his failure to exercise toward his fellow servant even a little of the generosity with which he himself had been treated. For some reason, he just did not get it. After being forgiven 10,000 talents, he threw into prison someone who owed him a debt that was 600 000 times smaller. Shouldn't he have shown more patience? That was the charge of the king in v. 32-33. *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?* If the master had insisted on his rights, there would have been no mercy, no cancellation of debt. But he did not insist, and he expected the same of his servant. The servant should have been merciful.

What this means for us as Christians is that God's forgiveness of us must find an appropriate response in our life, in our relationships with other people. The privilege of being forgiven brings with it a serious responsibility. What responsibility? The responsibility that we, having been forgiven, will treat others in the same way. That is why I said that theme of the second episode is sanctification. Sanctification is concerned with our conduct. And Jesus said in this parable, 'You cannot detach the acceptance of God's mercy from your own behavior. You are to act toward others as God has acted toward you.' Paul expressed it in this way to the Philippians, ... ***work out your salvation with fear and trembling*** (Philippians 2:12). Being forgiven means that it has to be worked out in sanctification. God

has forgiven you. Now you go out and forgive others. That is 'working out your salvation.' God has loved you. Now, you go out and love others. God has been gracious to you. You go out and be gracious to others.

So here is a basic principle of the Christian life: we are to deal with others in the same way that God deals with us. This is what the Lord is teaching us in the second scene. God expects us to deal with others in the same way as He deals with us.

This teaching is mentioned specifically by Jesus like this in Luke 6:36: *Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful*. In the same way that God has been merciful to you, so you must be merciful to others.

Do you now see the freedom that we have as Christians? God is merciful to me and therefore, I am merciful to others. It does not matter what the other person does to me. The important thing is how God deals with me. In the world, people's behavior is very often tit for tat. You are nasty to me; I am going to be nasty to you. You offended me; I will offend you. It is not so in the Christian life. My conduct is not dictated by your actions. My conduct as a Christian is governed by one thing only, namely how God deals with me. That is how a Christian can be a free agent in the world. He becomes a channel of God's grace, of God's forgiveness, regardless of what people do to him.

Episode 3: judgment

The theme of the third episode is judgment. It teaches that an unforgiving person will be judged.

In this last act, the unforgiving servant faces an angry king. V. 34: *"And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him*. The king, filled with anger, decided to put the debt of 10,000 talents back on the shoulders of the servant. The man was handed over to the torturers until the debt was fully paid. Given the enormity of the debt, the imprisonment will be permanent. This is a picture of damnation.

This verse, v. 34, is the close counterpart of v. 30, which describes in similar language the first servant's imprisonment of his fellow servant until his debt was paid.

Matthew 18:30 "He was unwilling however, but went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed.

It demonstrates concretely the principle that as one treats others so also one will be treated. What the servant had done to his debtor, the king now does to him: justice is administered without mercy. James brings out this reciprocal relationship between man's mercy and God's in James 2:13: *For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy*. The person who is not merciful cannot expect to receive mercy at the judgment.

If the debt represents our sins, if the king stands for God and if the servants symbolize the disciples, then the conclusion has to be this. As the master revoked the earlier cancellation of his servant's debt, so too God will revoke his forgiveness of a disciple's sins if that disciple, like the first servant in the parable, refuses to forgive the sins of another disciple.

This parable is very hard to interpret for those who hold the view that a forgiven person cannot fall away and lose forgiveness (Calvinists). They often argue that no true disciple could ever act as the servant in the story did. The one who does shows that he has not truly received forgiveness.

It seems to me that this argument is not supported by the text when we examine it closely. Just look at the use of the word 'forgive.' The word 'forgive' occurs twice in this parable and in both cases, it is applied to the first servant in reference to the removal of his debt of 10,000 talents.

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

*Matthew 18:32 "Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I **forgave** you all that debt because you entreated me.*

The servant was forgiven. I don't see how we can deny it. He did get a complete remission of debt. This being the case, does it not follow that he represents a Christian who has truly experienced God's forgiveness? And because this believer has proved himself unworthy of God's mercy by refusing to forgive others, the initial forgiveness was withdrawn.

What then becomes of the eternal security of the believer? The perseverance of the saints is taught impressively in Scripture, I agree. But judgment is taught just as abundantly. I believe that every security text should be taught with vigor, but never without also teaching the warning texts just as faithfully. The true believer learns to live with both - with a spirit of both full security and of responsible fear.

Salvation is by sheer mercy apart from a prior condition of good works, as this parable shows. But free pardon does not mean canceled judgment. When forgiveness ends only in the believer's reception of it, and when he does not permit this forgiveness to continue on out to others, then divine forgiveness becomes divine judgment.