

Forgiven People Forgive, Part 1:

The Forgiven Slave

Matthew 18:21–35

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Introduction

Well it is good to be with you this morning to celebrate, as we do every Sunday morning, the glory and majesty of our resurrected King, the Lord Jesus Christ—and especially, in these weeks leading up to Christmas, to celebrate the glory of His incarnation: that God the eternal Son, took on flesh, and made His dwelling among us. He is Immanuel, God with us.

And as we anticipate Christmas and look to set our minds on the truths that such a season reminds us of, my mind has been drawn to a passage in the 18th chapter of Matthew, and to the topic of forgiveness. And one reason that my mind has been drawn to forgiveness is because Christmastime always signals the end of the current year, and the anticipation of the beginning of the new year. And when we think about seasons of culmination and corresponding new beginnings, it's natural to be drawn to thoughts of wiping the slate clean, of starting fresh. It's the idea that, if we've allowed some conflict to persist between us, we don't want an old year to pass and a new year to begin without dealing with that—without putting that conflict to rest—without seeking and granting forgiveness.

And besides that, in a real sense, the *purpose* of Christmas is forgiveness! The purpose of the incarnation of God the Son was so that sinners could be forgiven—so that the punishment for sin, which was *due* only to man, and yet which could only be *borne* by God, would be borne by the God-man! No one *ought* to pay for sin except man, and no one *could* pay for sin except God, and so in order to accomplish the just forgiveness of ruined sinners, God became man!

And so: Christmas is about forgiveness. It is about God's forgiveness of the sins of His people through the perfect redemption of Christ, our Great Substitute. And it is also—on the basis of that very forgiveness, of God's forgiveness of our sins—it is also about our forgiveness of those who have sinned against us. Our being *forgiven* and our being *forgiving* are inextricably linked. And perhaps no passage illustrates that truth more vividly than Matthew 18, verses 21 to 35.

And that text comes upon the heels of the Lord's teaching on church discipline, in Matthew 18:15–20, where He outlines the four steps that believers are to follow in confronting sin in one another. “If your brother sins,” He says, “go and show him his fault in private.” If he doesn't listen, “take one or two more with you” so that you establish everything by the mouth of two or

three witnesses. If he still doesn't listen, you tell it to the whole church, so that the entire redeemed community pursues this brother and aims to convince him of his sin, of the harm that it inflicts, and of the need for repentance. There is to be private rebuke, plural rebuke, and then public rebuke. And then if he doesn't listen even to the whole church, you put him out of the church, because by refusing to repent of sin he is behaving like an unbeliever.

Well, on the heels of that text, Peter pipes up and asks Jesus, verse 21, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?" And we understand the question. Jesus has just said that there are going to be occasions—even among the people of God—where your brother or sister in the Lord sins against you. And church discipline outlines what to do when there isn't repentance. But Peter's thinking, "What about when there *is* repentance—or at least *confession*—but when a brother sins against me repeatedly? If it's a couple of times here and there, I know that I should be quick to forgive him. But what if it's over and over again? Does forgiveness have a limit?"

And rather than wait for a response, Peter immediately offers a suggestion: "Up to seven times?" And Peter thinks he's being very generous, here. The custom of the rabbis was to forgive an offense that was committed three times but to refuse forgiveness for the fourth transgression. They misinterpreted statements from the book of Amos, where God says, for example, in Amos 2:6, "For three transgressions of Israel and for four, I will not revoke its punishment." And the rabbis argued that that meant that God forgives three transgressions but not four, and so that should be our practice as well. Peter doubles the rabbis' recommendation and then adds one. So he's feeling very magnanimous. "Lord, I am prepared to bear the offense; not once, not twice, not three times. I will be faithful to forgive up to *seven* times!"

But Jesus replies, verse 22: "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy *times* seven." And I would have just loved to see the look on Peter's face! The disciples would have all looked at each other and said, "Seventy times seven?" Now, seventy times seven is 490. But Jesus' point is not that "You are to forgive someone who commits the same offense against you 490 times, but boy: when they strike 491, you can unleash vengeance!" No. Jesus takes the number seven—which some say is the number of the perfection of a series—multiplies it by itself, and then multiplies it again by ten, which some say is the number of perfection in the abstract. It's as if He's saying, "Perfection times perfection times perfection!" It's something akin to our saying, "Infinity times infinity times infinity!"

The point is it's uncountable. There isn't to be a limit to the Christian's forgiveness. You say, "Mike, are you sure Jesus didn't really mean 490 and then let 'em have it? I mean, I can keep records with the best of 'em!" Yes, I am sure you can! We can all tend to be scrupulous record keepers, can't we? "489, 490, *491!* 'Now, brother, I've been forbearing this offense for 490 times, but you've just crossed the threshold—" No! We are to *love* our brothers and sisters in the

body of Christ. We are to *love* our neighbor as ourselves. And what does 1 Corinthians 13:5 say? “Love...does not take into *account* a wrong suffered.” Other translations say love “keeps *no record* of wrongs.” Love doesn’t keep score. Love forbears, and forgives, believes, and endures.

One commentator says, “Peter’s question is misconceived; if one is still counting, however ‘generously,’ one is not forgiving” (France, 705). Another, the great commentator Matthew Henry, writes, “It does not look well for us to keep count of the offences done against us by our brethren. There is something of ill-nature in scoring up the injuries we forgive, as if we would allow ourselves to be revenged when the measure is full. God keeps an account (Deut 32:34), because he is the Judge, and vengeance is his; but we must not, lest we be found stepping into his throne. It is necessary to the preservation of peace, both within and without, to pass by injuries, without reckoning how often; to forgive, and forget.” And in fact, in Luke 17:3–4, Jesus says, “If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you *seven times a day*, and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.” And so here is the principle—one that needs to take root in the soil of every Christian’s heart: where there is repentance, there is forgiveness. Where there is the seeking of forgiveness, there is the granting of forgiveness. When a brother or sister repents, Christians forgive. We are to be extravagant, lavish forgivers!

And why is that? Because we have been extravagantly, lavishly forgiven! In Ephesians chapter 4 and verse 32, Paul says, “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” In Colossians chapter 3, and verse 13, Paul says, “...bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also [must] you.” The weight of those words needs to land on us. We are to be a lavishly *forgiving* people, because we are a lavishly *forgiven* people.

We need to be freshly affected by the weight of our own sin—by the sheer magnitude of the debt we owe to God for the offenses we have committed against His holiness. And we need to be ravished by the scandalous mercy—by the free grace and boundless compassion of the forgiveness we have received from God through Christ. And we need to compare the mountain of our own sin against God, which has been freely forgiven, to the molehills of offenses that even our fellow-Christians commit against us, and we need to bend out the very mercy we have received to them in forgiveness.

And Jesus makes this very point by following up His “seventy times seven” answer by telling a parable, in verses 23 to 35—a parable that will be the subject of our study both this Sunday morning and the next. And it is a parable that illustrates the mercy of God to us in His forgiveness of our sins through the atoning work of Christ, as well as our Gospel-driven duty to forgive as we have been forgiven. Those are the **two broad movements** of the parable: we have

the forgiven slave in verses 23 to 27, and **the unforgiving slave** in verses 28 to 35. And we'll take the first of those this morning, and the second next Sunday morning.

This first half that we'll dig into today is intended by the Lord Jesus to be a vivid and heart-ravishing illustration of God's bottomless grace in forgiving us. And so that's my goal for this morning: to assault your soul with views of the unspeakable glory of your salvation—of the riches you possess in Christ, of the treasure that is the forgiveness of sins! And to do that, we'll walk through the first half of the parable in **five scenes**.

I. The Slave's Incalculable Debt (vv. 23–24)

The **first scene** comes in verses 23 and 24. And it is the scene of **the slave's incalculable debt**. Jesus says in verse 23, "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves."

And again, Jesus indicates that we're dealing with life in the kingdom of God—speaking about how believers are to conduct themselves with one another. And He says it's like a king settling accounts with his slaves. In the ancient world, a king would have several officials appointed to oversee the various provinces of his kingdom. They were something like governors. And one of their primary responsibilities would be to collect the region's taxes for the king. And so at various times a king would call his governors to account for the tax money they were responsible to deliver. This is likely the scenario here.

Verse 24: "When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him *ten thousand talents* was brought to him." And at this point in the story, Jesus probably would have had to pick the disciples up off the ground. *Ten thousand talents* was an absurd amount of money even to think about, let alone to owe someone. A talent was a measurement of weight. It measured the weight of silver or gold. And when we hear of talents elsewhere in the New Testament, we hear of Jesus talking about servants who were entrusted with one talent, or five talents, or at the most ten talents. But 10,000 talents is absolutely unfathomable. Historical records estimate that "the total annual revenue collected by the Roman government from [the regions of] Idumea, Judea, Samaria, and Galilee was about 900 talents" (MacArthur, 148). Ten thousand talents would be more than eleven years' tax revenue from all four of those provinces!

A denarius, which we'll talk about when we get to verse 28, was one day's wage for a common day laborer; we see that from a passage like Matthew 20 verse 2. A talent was equivalent to six thousand denarii. So, a talent was six thousand days' wages, or roughly sixteen and a half years of an average earner's income. Ten thousand talents would then be sixty million days' wages! Or 164,383 years' pay!

This is an unfathomable number, an absolutely **incalculable debt**. In fact, the Greek term *myrios* that gets translated “ten thousand” in this text was actually the highest number in the Greek language, and because of that, it was often used figuratively to represent an uncountable number. We borrow the term into English in the word “myriad.” And we see it used this way in Revelation 5:11, where we read of the number of the angels of heaven being “myriads of myriads.” Like “seventy times seven,” “ten thousand talents” isn’t intended to be a unit of legitimate measurement. It’s meant to be *hyperbole* that signifies a number that cannot be counted. Saying the slave owed the king ten thousand talents is like saying he owed him a *zillion* dollars, or a *bajillion* dollars. It is an absolutely **incalculable debt**.

And what this teaches us is that each and every one of us slaves owes God, our king, an **incalculable debt**. And why is that? It is because of our sin. By virtue of God being our Creator and King, by virtue of our being created in His image, we are accountable to Him. We are obligated to obey the law of His mouth, the commandments of which are only the external expression of His holy character. And every single sin we commit—whether in thought, word, or deed—is a transgression of the holy law of God, is a violation, an affront, to the holy character of God. And therefore, every single sin we commit amasses a debt that we owe to Him. We have violated holy justice, and therefore, a penalty must be paid, and so a debt is owed.

This is why Scripture speaks of our sin as debt. In Colossians 2:14, Paul speaks of the broken law of God as “the certificate of *debt* consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us.” In Matthew chapter 6, as the Lord teaches His disciples to pray to the Father, He teaches us to petition Him, Matthew 6:12, “And forgive us our *debts*, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Sin amasses a debt that we owe to God.

And like the slave in the parable, our sin-debt is **incalculable**. It is a debt of ten thousand talents! It is a debt of zillions or bajillions of dollars! It is an *infinite* debt! a debt beyond measurement or tracing out! Why? Because God is infinitely holy. He is infinitely worthy of all obedience and devotion. And that means: every single sin that anyone ever commits is a sin against infinite holiness. And a sin against infinite holiness is infinitely wicked. And an infinitely wicked act merits an infinite punishment.

Back in October, we hosted the first “Puritan Conference” here on our campus. And I was assigned to give two talks, one of which was “The Puritans on the Sinfulness of Sin and the Greatness of Grace.” And what a fruitful topic of study that was for me! It convinced me that we don’t meditate often enough on the sinfulness of sin—on its supreme wickedness, its loathsomeness and filthiness. Sin doesn’t disgust us like it should for the vile thing that it is. The Puritans called it “the plague of plagues,” “the evil of evils,” and it seemed that almost every Puritan wrote a treatise at some point in their lives entitled “The Sinfulness of Sin.” And the sinfulness of sin is measured chiefly by how diametrically opposed it stands to the God of all

goodness and beauty. In his book, *Heaven Opened*, Joseph Alleine wrote, “Sin is the insurrection and rebellion of the heart against God. It turns from Him and turns against Him; it runs over to the camp of the enemy and there takes up arms against God. Sin is a running from God and a fighting against God; it would spoil the Lord of all the jewels of His crown. It opposes the sovereignty of God. A sinful heart would set up itself in God’s throne; it would be king in His stead and have the command of all. Sinners would be their own gods” (190). Ralph Venning wrote, sin “goes about to ungod God, and is by some of the ancients called *Deicidium*, God-murder or God-killing” (*Sinfulness of Sin*, 30). *Sin* would, if it could *kill* God, and *be* God in His place. And in one of the more striking passages you’ll ever read, John Bunyan wrote, “Sin is the dare of God’s justice, the rape of his mercy, the jeer of his patience, the slight of his power, the contempt of his love” (*Dying Sayings*, 79).

Is it any wonder that sin against a God so good, so glorious, and infinitely holy as our God—is it any wonder that even a single sin merits an infinite punishment? obligates us to an **incalculable debt**? And yet we haven’t committed just one sin against infinite holiness, have we? We haven’t committed just one sin per day against infinite holiness. We have committed thousands upon tens of thousands of sins. David speaks for all of us in Psalm 40 verse 12 when he says, “Evils beyond number have surrounded me; my iniquities have overtaken me, so that I am not able to see; they are more numerous than the hairs of my head, and my heart has failed me.”

Dear friends, our King has fixed a day in which He is going to call us into His presence and settle accounts with us. And every last one of us, by virtue of who we are by nature, will, because of our sins, owe Him an **incalculable debt**.

II. The Slave’s Inability to Pay (v. 25a)

But having said that, that brings us, secondly, to **the slave’s inability to pay**. Verse 25: “But since he did not have the means to repay...” And we’ll stop there for just a moment—though this barely needs any comment at all. It follows from the very nature of an incalculable debt that no one has the **ability to pay it**. None of us can pay for our sins. Our condition is utterly hopeless, of ourselves.

I mean, even if we took “ten thousand talents” literally. Imagine you were summoned to court with no expectation that anything was wrong. And you say, “Your honor, what seems to be the problem?” And he hands you an envelope that says you’ve been delinquent in the payment of your taxes. And you say, “Well, I don’t know how that could have happened!” And the bailiff brings you the envelope, and you open it and discover that you owe *eleven and a half billion dollars* to the federal government! It’s hard to even fathom, isn’t it, because it’s a number that’s just so outlandish—almost cartoonish. But imagine if it were real. How would you feel? You’d feel absolutely helpless, entirely at a loss, like you’d feel if you’d invested every penny you had

into a particular stock that just went belly-up, times eleven billion! And that's exactly how you *should* feel. That's why in Romans 5:6, Paul calls every sinner in our natural condition: "helpless"—*asthenēs*, without strength.

You say, "Well, look now, I know that I'm not perfect, but on the whole I think I'm a pretty good person. I'm certainly not as sinful as some people I know!" But James 2:10 says, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all." If you break even one of the commandments of God's law, He says you're guilty of breaking them all.

You say, "Ok, well if I'm guilty, let me at least try to pay for my crimes!" But no, your debt is **unpayable!** Psalm 49:7–8 says, "No man can by any means redeem his brother or give to God a ransom for him—For the redemption of his soul is costly, and he should cease trying forever." And your soul's redemption doesn't cost any less than your brother's soul. You can't pay! It's just impossible!

You say, "No, I'll cleanse myself of my stains!" In Jeremiah 2:22, God says, "Although you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your iniquity is before Me." "But I can change! I can do better!" Jeremiah 13:23: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then you also can do good who are accustomed to doing evil." "But I'll work hard!" Romans 3:20: "by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight."

No, we must all make the confession that Augustus Toplady wrote in that wonderful hymn, "Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me": "Not the labors of my hands, can fulfill Thy law's demands. Could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow: all for sin could not atone."

III. The Slave's Deserved Condemnation (v. 25b)

And so, what is the consequence? For that we come in the third place, not only to the slave's incalculable debt and the slave's inability to pay, but also, number three, **the slave's deserved condemnation**. Verse 25 again: "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."

This was something of a common practice in the ancient world: where someone who had found himself unable to pay a debt would sell himself into servitude under the one to whom he owed money, basically to work off by manual labor the debt that he owed. The law of God, in Leviticus 25, takes for granted that such a practice will occur from time to time, and it makes provision for the family of such a one who had become so poor as to need to sell himself into slavery to redeem him by paying his debt as a ransom price. Well, such was the case for this slave, along with his whole family. Since the wife and children of a man were considered to

belong to him as the head of his household, they themselves were assets that would be taken from him, and all of them—along with their personal possessions—were to be sold into slavery, and the money that such a sale would garner would be paid back to the king toward the ten-thousand-talent debt. Now, of course, there is no way that a lifetime of servitude could repay even a fraction of what this man owed his king. But the point was that the man was to be punished for his mismanagement of the stewardship entrusted to him by his lord. This is the debtor's prison.

And in the same way, the sinner's **deserved condemnation** for our sins is the debtor's prison of hell itself. This is what our sin deserves! Jesus speaks of hell as something of a debtor's prison in several places, but we'll go just to Luke 12:57–59. There, Jesus rebukes the crowds and warns them of the certainty of their **deserved condemnation**. He says, “Why do you not even on your own initiative judge what is right? For while you are going with your opponent to appear before the magistrate, on your way there make an effort to settle with him, so that he may not drag you before the judge, and the judge turn you over to the officer, and the officer throw you into *prison*. I say to you, *you will not get out of there* until you have *paid the very last cent*.” What's He saying? He's saying that someone who is going to court to settle a matter, and who knows that he's guilty, would be a fool not to settle out of court with his accuser, because then he's going to have to face the judge. And the judge is going to expose him as guilty, hand him over to the court officer, and the court officer is going to throw him into prison until his debt is repaid.

And friends, what Jesus is saying is: our court date is coming! You might say our entire life is lived on the way to our appointment at the Judgment Seat of God. And each and every one of us is guilty. We've all sinned. We've all broken God's law. We've all lied, we've all stolen, we've all blasphemed God's name, we've all looked with lust, we've all been unjustly angry and therefore have committed what Jesus says is murder in our hearts. My unbelieving friend, you sit here this morning on the way to Judgment Day, and you know that you're guilty. Settle out of court! Settle your case with God before you ever get to the judgment, by trusting in the blood and righteousness of the One who has volunteered to pay your debt. Because when you stand before Him as your Judge, clothed in the filthy rags of your own sins—devoid of the pure robe of the righteousness that God requires of all those who would stand in His presence—He is going to cast you into the debtor's prison of hell until you can pay what you owe.

And the reality is, friend, that, like the man in the parable, you'll never be able to pay what you owe, because, as we've said, every sin you commit is perpetrated against an infinitely holy God, and so every sin is an infinite crime. It makes you infinitely guilty, and therefore it incurs an infinite debt and merits an infinite punishment. And Scripture speaks about that as eternity in hell—eternity in a place which Jesus Himself describes as “the furnace of fire [where] there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” That horrible place is the just punishment that your sins deserve, that my sins deserve. It is our **deserved condemnation**. The great commentator John

Gill writes, "...but think, O sinner, what you will be able to say and do, when God comes to reckon with you, and you have nothing to pay, nor any[one] to pay for you, or be your surety; a prison must be thy portion forever."

IV. The Slave's Plea for Mercy (v. 26)

And that being the case, I hope every last one of you within the sound of my voice has the good sense to do what this slave does next—though not, as we'll see, in the precise way he does it. Our **fourth scene** is: **the slave's plea for mercy**. We see it in verse 26: "So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.'"

He does the only sensible thing a man in his position can do. When you're a slave, under the bondage of an incalculable debt that you are unable to pay, staring down the sentence of your deserved condemnation, the only reasonable thing to do is bow down on your face and beg for mercy.

But there's something curious about the way this man asks for mercy. He asks for mercy in the form of patience. "Have *patience* with me, and I *will repay* you everything." This man owes eleven and a half billion dollars! 165,000 years' wages! "Sure, buddy. How much time would you like?"

"I'll repay you everything!" This man is delusional to think that simply more time would suffice for him to pay such an incalculable, unpayable debt!

And yet, isn't that perfectly illustrative of the sinner's natural, legalistic disposition? When we're confronted with the absolute holiness of God and the sheer magnitude of our sin and the unbearable weight of our deserved judgment, what do we say? "Oh, I've got to do better! I've got to clean up my life! I've got to turn over a new leaf! I've got to reform myself! I've got to pay God back! If I can just get a handle on my vices, I know God will understand! I'll just put away the drugs and alcohol! I'll stop the fornication and the sexual immorality! I'll get a real tight grip on my language and my thought life! I'll even get back into going to church and reading my Bible!" Do you know what all that sounds like to God? "Have patience with me, Lord, and I'll repay you all of my eleven-billion-dollar debt!"

And He says, "Oh really? And what are you going to pay me with?" And you say, "With my righteousness, Lord! With my cessation of sin!" And there are two problems with that. One is that even if you could, this very moment, summon the willpower from within yourself to stop committing sin in thought, word, and deed for the rest of your life—you still wouldn't be able to pay for the ten thousand talents of debt you've racked up for your entire life. But second: what

estimation does God make of your righteousness? Isaiah 64:6: “For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment.” You want to pay your sin-debt with promises of righteousness? God says, “That’s trying to pay an eleven-billion-dollar debt with your dirty underwear.” It’s never going to happen! It’s what Paul says about the Jews of the first century in Romans 10:2–3: “For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God’s righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God.” They are ignorant of the true height of God’s holiness, and they are ignorant about true depth of their sin. And so they refuse God’s righteousness revealed in the Gospel, and they seek to establish their own righteous via the Law.

But the law was never given to provide man’s righteousness, but only to aggravate his debt. And so if you go to the law looking to *pay* your debt, you’re going to find no relief. You’re only going to *increase* your debt. It’s like that scene in Pilgrim’s Progress, when Christian strays from the narrow and difficult path of the cross that Evangelist commended to him, and follows the counsel of Mr. Worldly-Wiseman, who tells him he can be rid of his burden by going to the house of Mr. Legality, who dwells in the town of Morality, over by the high hill. And so Christian approaches the hill, but when he gets close to it, he thinks that the top of it was hanging so much over the bottom that he was afraid it was going to fall on his head. And flashes of fire came out of the hill, just like Mount Sinai quaked with smoke and fire as God gave Israel the law. And then Bunyan tells us that the burden of sin that Christian was carrying on his back now felt *heavier* to him than while he was on the way of the cross.

If you seek to pay your sin-debt to God by asking for more time, your debt will only grow; your burden will only be heavier; and you’ll only store up more wrath for yourself on the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God. God doesn’t delight in your sacrifices; the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, and a contrite heart, as David says in Psalm 51:17. We are to seek the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ, Romans 3:22. And Paul says, in Romans 4:5, “To the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited unto righteousness.” It’s the difference between the Pharisee and the tax collector in the parable of Luke 18:9–14. The Pharisee thanks God for all of the ways he’s better than other sinners. But the tax collector, broken over his sin, knows that he doesn’t have anything of his own to commend to God—so much so that he won’t even look to the heavens, but stands with his face to the ground and beating his breast, pleading, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner!” Not: “Be patient with me and I’ll repay you everything!” But, “Lord, I have no hope of ever paying my debt to You! I’ve got nothing of my own to commend to you, least of all the filthy rags of my own righteousness! No, ‘Nothing in my hand I bring! Naked, I come to Thee for dress! Helpless, I look to Thee for grace! Foul, I to the fountain fly. Wash me, Savior, or I die!’ I ask not for more time to satisfy Your justice; I could never do it! Not in 165,000 years!

Lord, I ask for *mercy*. I ask that You would forgive me. I ask that out of the bounty of Your own free grace, that you would cancel the debt of my sin!”

That’s what this man in our parable should have prayed. And friend, it’s what you must pray, in your **plea for mercy**.

V. The King’s Compassionate Forgiveness (v. 27)

And that leads us, in the **fifth** place, to the final scene in this parable. And that is: **the King’s compassionate forgiveness**. This slave doesn’t even ask for mercy in the proper way. He asks for more time to satisfy justice. And yet, verse 27, “the lord of that slave”—this glorious, large-hearted, gracious king—“felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt.” And O, that there were words to express the beauty, and the glory, and the majesty of these words!

I mean, this is just unthinkable! The master was owed ten thousand talents! Eleven billion dollars! And he simply absorbed the debt! He suffered the loss himself, and he forgave his ruined slave!

Why would he do such a thing? The text says it is because the lord of the slave felt compassion on him. And what a glorious Gospel-word this Greek term is! *Splangchnizomai*—one of my very favorite Greek words. The *splangchna* referred to a man’s bowels, his guts. And so *splangchnizomai* means to be so moved with compassion that the bowels yearn—that there is such compassion that wells up in the heart of a man that he can feel it in his stomach. And do you know something? This term is used a dozen times in the Gospels, and it only refers to the compassion of God, or the compassion of Christ, or the compassion of someone who is illustrating God or Christ’s disposition in the work of salvation. In Matthew 9:36, Jesus has compassion on the crowds, because they had no one to teach them, and were like sheep without a shepherd. In Matthew 14:14, Jesus wants to be alone in a secluded place, but He has compassion on the crowd and heals their sick. In Matthew 20:30, Jesus has compassion on the blind men begging the Son of David for their sight. In Mark 1:41, He has compassion on the unclean leper, and says, “I am willing; be cleansed.” In Luke 7:13, He has compassion on the widow of Nain who had lost her only son, and so He raises him from the dead.

And here: We have a picture as clear as day of the unspeakable **compassion** of the God of heaven who freely, out of pure and unmitigated **compassion**, pities poor sinners who had ruined ourselves in the infinite debt of our sin—who could hope for nothing but eternity in the debtor’s prison of hell—and He forgives us our debt! Matthew Henry commented here and said, “The servant’s prayer was, Have patience with me; the master’s grant is a discharge in full.”

Our inclination—the natural legalists that we are—is to tell God to be patient and expect payment. “I’ll make it up to You, God! I’ll atone for my sins!” And if God should consent to such a payment plan, we would be ruined for eternity—slaves in the debtor’s prison of hell, laboring under the anguish of weeping and gnashing of teeth, with no hope of ever repaying the debt. Such is what the law of strict justice requires. And yet God comes to us in the Gospel and says (and here I’m quoting Martin Luther), “No, not so, my dear friend, it will do no good for you to torture and torment yourself to madness; your works accomplish nothing, but God’s mercy does it all; he has compassion on your affliction, and sees you a captive in such anguish, struggling in the mire and that cannot help yourself out, he sees that you cannot pay the debt, therefore he forgives you all.” A bit later, Luther says, “He might well have proceeded and said: ‘You must pay, I have the right to demand it, I will not on your account annul my own right,’ and no one could have blamed him.” And that’s exactly right. It would not have been the slightest blight on God’s justice for Him to demand that every sinner pay for our sins in eternal conscious torment. It would have been only right, only just, only biblical for Him to do so. And “Yet,” Luther continues, “[the king] does not wish to deal with [the slave] according to our ideas of right, but changes justice into grace, has mercy on him, and gives him liberty, with wife and child and everything he has, and makes him a present of the debt besides.”

Now, you say, “Changes justice into grace”? How does *that* work? God’s grace isn’t at odds with His justice. And that’s right; they’re not at odds. God is both just *and* justifier. But how? Because He discharges the infinite debt of our sin by the infinite propitiatory payment of the Lord Jesus Christ. God does not abrogate His justice in forgiving us. He doesn’t just sweep our sin-debt under the rug. He doesn’t just take the bills and say, “Ah, kids will be kids!” and rip them up. No: “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf!” “Yahweh has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him!” “He bore our sins in His body on the cross!” God demands full payment for sin! For every sin ever committed in history! But in the case of those of us who are beneficiaries of His **compassionate forgiveness**, He demands our full payment from our Substitute!

And the Father finds in Christ a Substitute who is willing. John 10:18: “No one takes My life from Me; I lay it down of My own accord.” Matthew 20:28: don’t miss it. “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” This is *why* He came! He is the One who says, as John Flavel has so memorably put it, “O my Father, such is my love to, and pity for them, that rather than they shall perish eternally, I will be responsible for them as their Surety; bring in all thy bills, that I may see what they owe thee; Lord, bring them all in, that there may be no after-reckonings with them; at my hand shalt thou require it. I will rather choose to suffer thy wrath than [that] they should suffer it: upon me, my Father, upon me be all their debt.” O, dear people, let your heart sing in worship of such a willing Substitute!

But not only is your Substitute willing; He is able to undertake to pay your sin debt. Ten thousand talents! Eleven and a half billion dollars! Eternity! Infinite wrath and punishment for ages and ages without end! For not just *one* sinner, but for *every* sinner who comes to Him in repentance and faith! O what a debt Jesus has paid for His people! How glorious must He be! How worthy must He be! How precious His blood must be! How infinite His righteousness must be to pay an infinite debt for an innumerable host of sinners!

O what a Savior is our Savior! This is the Savior we celebrate at Christmastime: this Gospel of **compassionate forgiveness!**

Conclusion

A little later on in Pilgrim's Progress, Faithful is telling Christian about his journey, and he speaks about how a man had been running after him, and when he caught up to him he knocked him to the ground as if he were dead. And when he came to he asked the man why, and he knocked him out a second time, as if he were dead. And he said, "So, when I came to myself again, I cried him mercy; but he said, I know not how to show mercy; and with that [he] knocked me down again." And Christian tells him, "That man that overtook you was Moses. He spares none, nor does he know how to show mercy to those that transgress his law." And Faithful says, "He [would have] doubtless made an *end* of me, [except] One came by, and bid him forbear." Someone came and made Moses stop beating Faithful. And Christian asks who that was. And Faithful says, "I did not know Him at first, but as He went by, I perceived the holes in His hands, and in His side; then I concluded that He was our Lord."

The law does not know how to show mercy. It beats us mercilessly (but justly) for even our inward inclinations to sin. And, given the magnitude of the debt we owe, if we sought for relief from the law, it would surely beat us into the death of eternal punishment. But there is One who comes and makes the law forbear—not by overturning justice, but by suffering in Himself the demands justice makes upon us, by absorbing the full weight of our debt! Rich wounds, those holes in His hands and side!

And the point that Jesus is making, dear people, is that if we are to learn this principle of *seventy times seven* forgiveness—of lavish, extravagant, unending forgiveness—we need to dwell much upon the lavish, extravagant, infinite forgiveness that we have been granted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And that means we need to dwell much on the infinite debt that we owe, and let our hearts be melted by the **compassionate forgiveness** of God our King through Christ our Substitute. Think of what you were when the Lord saved you. Think of how foolishly you lived—how fruitless and futile and worthless was the path that you were walking; how you would totally waste your life if He left you to yourself. Think of what boundless debt you had amassed by your life of sin, how exquisitely you deserved His punishment, and then think of

how freely you were forgiven—how extravagant was the forgiveness that was lavished upon you.

Flavel writes, “Reader, let me beg you, if you be one of this pardoned number, to look over the cancelled bonds, and see what vast sums are remitted to you. Remember what you were in your natural estate: ... What, and yet pardoned! full and finally pardoned, and that freely, as to any hand that you had in the procurement of it! What can you do but fall down at the feet of free grace, and kiss those feet that moved so freely towards so vile a sinner?”

And the point that Jesus will make in the remainder of the parable is: Can it be that you kiss the feet of free grace, and yet refuse to exercise free grace in your forgiveness of fellow slaves? Can you imagine someone receiving such scandalous forgiveness—to be forgiven such an incalculable debt—and then refusing to forgive a brother or sister in Christ of what can only be an infinitely lesser offense than one’s own against God? It should be unthinkable. And yet unfortunately it is not. For some of you, it’s a pattern of life. And it simply cannot be. Please come back next week, as we encounter such an unthinkable scenario, and seek to apply the benefit of this text even further to our own practice.