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# MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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## The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

Matthew 18: 21-35, Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.

<sup>23</sup> "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup> When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. <sup>25</sup> And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup> So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' <sup>27</sup> And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup> But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' <sup>29</sup> So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' <sup>30</sup> He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. <sup>32</sup> Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' <sup>34</sup> And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. <sup>35</sup> So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you,

if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." <sup>1</sup>

## Church Discipline

The passage that precedes this passage of Matthew 18:21-35 is Matthew 18:15-20. It is a very well-known passage for it details the process for Biblical church discipline. At the sin of a brother or sister, we are to go and "reprove [them] in private" which means that we are to point out their error. (Matthew 18:15) If they do not listen, we are to bring a witness and do the same. (Matthew 18:16) And if they still refuse to listen, we are to tell it to the church whose job it will be to shepherd the one in sin unto repentance. (Matthew 18:17) But if, tragically, this brother or sister refuses to repent, eventually the process will lead to excommunication where the person is delivered over to Satan and declared to be a non-Christian. (Matthew 18:17b-20)

This is the very difficult call of church discipline. In fact, the difficulty of this process can be measured by how infrequently it actually is practiced today. The tendency when we are wronged is rather than going to the brother or sister who has offended us we go to our spouse or best friend who ultimately counsels us to go to "the pastor." And thus, the Biblical and positive path of church discipline is neglected and rejected for gossip!

And yet, as difficult a process that this passage is to follow today, there is a more difficult scenario implied here; what do we do when we are horribly offended by another person? Do we hurt inside by the oversight or the offense? When we have been neglected, set aside, or personally offended do we go to this very insensitive brother or sister and they say, "Forgive me!"? What do we do when a brother or sister sins against us two, three, and four times, and each time says, "Sorry!"? Is a "sorry" all that is needed for me to continue loving and forgiving this brother or sister?

To put it another way, "How often shall my brother or sister sin against me and I forgive them?"

Now, the answer to this question is found in our text. Christ exhorted His disciples regarding the importance and the process of church discipline. Peter raised, what I call, the question of the hour, "Then (more literally, "shortly after") Peter came and said to Him, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?'" (Matthew 18:21-35)

It is important to note that Peter is being generous here. Jewish law taught that since God is said to have forgiven Israel's enemies only three times.<sup>2</sup> Certainly Israel's forgiveness needn't be any more generous. As such, they taught that the limit of forgiveness was three transgressions.

For example, Rabbi Jose ben Hanina said, "He who begs forgiveness from his neighbor must not do so more than three times." (Bokser) And Rabbi Jose ben Jehuda said, "If a man commits an offense once, they forgive him; if he commits an offense a second time, they forgive him; if he commits an offense a third time, they forgive him; the fourth time they do not forgive him." (Bokser)

In this context, Peter no doubt thought that he was being gracious. After all, the teaching of the Rabbis

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible : English standard version*. 2001 (Mt 18:21–35). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

<sup>2</sup> cf. Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; Job 33:29

regarding forgiveness stopped at just three offenses. And yet notice, Peter's suggested standard really is no different than the Rabbi's since both portrayed forgiveness as something that can be measured. In contrast, notice Christ's response...

Matthew 18:22, "Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.'"

By seventy times seven, Christ did not mean to set the limit of 490 times. Rather, Christ took Peter's "generous" number and multiplied it by seventy, in essence, indicating a number that was beyond counting. When it comes to the believer's call to forgive, there is no limit! Genuine forgiveness knows no boundaries; it is a state of the heart, not a matter of calculation.

We might as well ask this: How many times must a husband love his wife? How many times must a Christian obey the law? And so the point of Christ here is that if a fellow Christian sins against you repeatedly, day after day, our call is nothing less than the standard of God's grace, which increases where sin increases.<sup>3</sup> A brother or sister's sin must not surpass our forgiveness. With this, Christ transitions into a parable to illustrate His point.

Matthew 18:23, "For this reason (or, "In light of what I have just said...") the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a certain king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves."

The word "slaves" is used in the broadest sense of those in submission to a sovereign, as all subjects of ancient monarchies were, regardless of their rank or wealth. In the ancient Near East, a king typically appointed governors/satraps to oversee the various provinces of his kingdom. Their primary responsibility was to collect taxes on his behalf. Based on the elements of this parable we conclude that Christ is telling a story about the relationship between a certain king and one of his satraps.

## Sympathy

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

This slave was probably one of the many regional tax-collecting officials that the king employed. And thus, his "debt" would have been large. Now as to the amount that this debt would be today, it really is impossible to determine because monetary values vary from one point in history to the next. And yet, that doesn't mean that we can't get a pretty good idea of what a debt of 10,000 talents meant to someone living in the first century. For example, from the Old Testament we are told that the total amount of gold given for use in the Temple was just over 8,000 talents. (1 Chronicles 29:4, 7) The weight of the gold that came to Solomon in one year was 666 talents of gold. (1 Kings 10:14) The total annual revenue collected by the Roman government in the second century A.D. from Idumea, Judea, Samaria, and Galilee was about 900 talents, and the governor in this parable owed 10,000 Talents.

Now, the Attic talent, which probably is the weight mentioned here, amounted to no less than 6,000 denarii, or sixteen and one half years worth of labor for the common man. If this is the standard of measurement, it would have taken the common man 166,667 years to amass this much wealth. Or, to

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<sup>3</sup> Compare Romans 4:32

state this another way, it would take over 2,777 lifetimes to accumulate 10,000 talents!

So, it is obvious that this official was in serious trouble.

Matthew 18:25, "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."

While Christ does not say it, it is obvious that this governor had dealt poorly with his king's money. As you scan ancient documents, paying a region's duty was rarely a problem (this is not to say that at times it wasn't at a great sacrifice). Thus, it is safe to assume that the implication of this parable is that this man had embezzled the funds, or at best wasted them. And thus as payment for this governor's poor stewardship, the king decided to sell the man into slavery and this would not have begun to pay for the debt. However, it would have served as a "costly" punishment to this man and an important lesson to the rest of this king's governors.

Matthew 18:26, "The slave therefore falling down, prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything.'"

This represents much more than the usual homage paid to a king. Rather, this man's actions are that of total submission and contrition. In essence, he was throwing himself completely on the monarch's mercy. And thus we read this:

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

No doubt, this would have been unbelievable to Christ's disciples. However, it served to illustrate Christ's point regarding the degree of our forgiveness. Truly, as 10,000 talents represented an immeasurable amount of money and yet it was forgiven. This needs to be our attitude toward one another!

Now to this point, this parable, though amazing on account of its extremes (the extreme debt and the extreme mercy shown) would have been quite illustrative and would have met the disciples with little shock. However, here is where the parable shifts gears to the unthinkable.

## The Cruelty

Matthew 18:28, "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': the implication here is that the first thing that this "governor" did when he left the presence of the king was to search for those who owed him money- no doubt the king's threat still weighed heavily upon his mind.

The first debtor that this governor found was a slave who owed him 100 denarii, a serious amount considering it represented 100 days of labor. And yet compared to the 10,000 talents, this would have been an infinitesimal amount (1/600,000 the amount). Now, rather than reflecting the king's compassion and grace, this governor began threatening and choking this man. According to ancient Roman writers, it was not uncommon for a creditor to actually wrench a debtor's neck until blood ran

from his nose.

Matthew 18:29-30, "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."

Notice that this slave's plea is almost identical to the governor's plea to the king, except at one point: whereas the slave could repay his debt, the governor could never have repaid his! Now we would expect that this plea should have shocked the governor into a right response; yet in this case, over this relatively small amount, these words evoked no sympathetic reaction. Instead, the governor threw this man into prison.<sup>4</sup>

## The Retribution

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

This understandably would have been the case!

Matthew 18:32-34, "Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave (or "you villain," "you scoundrel!"), I forgave you all that debt (debt being in the emphatic position) because you entreated me. Should you not also have had [more vividly, "was not this your lasting obligation..."] 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."

There are two phrases that need clarification here, the first is this one: "...handed him over to the torturers." (Matthew 18:34) The word for "torturer" originally was used of metal testers whose job it was to test the quality of a metal in a crucible. As such, they tempered the metal to discern its quality. Later, the term was used of the person who tempers a man to discern the quality of his character.

Clearly the King had no intention of killing this governor, just torturing him; or we might say, tempering him until he repented. In fact, when Christ intends the listener to think of death/execution, the terminology is, "casting into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Matthew 18:34, "...until he should repay all that was owed him."

It is believed by some, and I think that they are correct, that the "him" here is the governor. In fact, "him" doesn't appear in the original. The phrase literally reads, "...until he should repay all that was owed." And we ask, "Owed to whom?" The obvious answer here is, "Owed to himself" which effectively would have cancelled the debt of this slave. In other words, the King wanted the governor himself to pay the debt of this slave. And because the debt that this slave owed was due to the governor himself, the king essentially wanted this governor to forgive his servant. This is the idea here.

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<sup>4</sup> This could have been one of two prisons: (1) **Debtor's Prison**- this was a prison in which those with unpaid debts were cast. Food and drink often would not be provided. Care for the prisoner would only be given by family. Amazingly, the person cast into this prison was confined until he paid his debt. Q & A: How could he pay his debt if he was in prison? He couldn't- and that was the point! (2) **A Labor Camp**- here the indebted individual work until his debt was paid.

So, when the servants told the king of this wicked governor, the king disciplined him until he was willing to show, from his heart, the same mercy to his servant that was shown to him!

## The Significance

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

As the king assigned this governor to the torturers, so also God will discipline all His children who refuse to forgive another brother or sister. Notice, the discipline is for the purpose of bringing us to maturity in Christ, not punishment.

Now this begs the question: What is the point? What is Christ teaching the disciples and us here? In a sentence, "God's forgiven people, out of a loving gratitude for God's grace, must always forgive whoever has trespassed against them, especially when it comes to their brothers and sisters."

Now I don't know about you, but this is a very difficult message, for the natural man is so quick to remember the wrong and so slow to forgive. We could almost say that one of the favorite activities of our flesh is to hold a grudge. Louise XII of France articulated the feeling of so many today when he said, "Nothing smells so sweet as the dead body of your enemy." Now as graphic a picture as this is, it nevertheless is true of so many today. J. C. Ryle wrote this:

It is a melancholy fact that there are few Christian duties so little practiced as that of forgiveness: it is sad to see how much bitterness, unmercifulness, spite, hardness and unkindness there is among men. (Ryle, 1856)

And that is why forgiveness is such a frequently commanded activity in Scripture when it comes to the believer. Luke 7:40-50; 17:4; Matthew 5:7; 6:12, 14-15; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13; Ephesians 4:32 all exhort us to forgive the sins of our brothers and sisters. In fact, in your reading of Scripture if you discover an oft-repeated command, you can conclude that whatever is being commanded is not well practiced by us. And so it is with forgiveness!

Now toward this end, some have criticized this parable because it is so unthinkable, so unreal. There is no way that someone would forgive so large a debt. And if they did, there is no way that someone who had been forgiven so much would hold another debtor accountable when what was owed was so little. One commentator called this a "moral monstrosity."

And yet, that's the point of this parable! For Christians to be unwilling to forgive one another is unthinkable and bizarre a moral monstrosity!

And why is that? Because we have been forgiven so much! The correlation in this parable is striking. The parable is about a governor with a huge debt that he could never repay. And as each of us stand before God, we likewise stand before Him with a debt that we could never repay! Think of it. No matter what sin you have committed; great or small, every sin has as its object of offense our holy and perfect God!

Romans 3:23: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

While a brother or sister may offend me; and that grievously, it is important to note again that the debt of the 100 denarii slave was no small sum, it represented in Christ's day a very large amount! And likewise...

- To cheat and steal.
- To grumble against another.
- To murder or destroy.

All are serious sins and must be viewed as such! Nevertheless, the greatest transgression that a man could commit against another man cannot compare to the violence that is done against God in even the smallest sin, for God is holy and sinless, but we are full of sin! To lie to another man is to do that which that man himself has done a thousand times before, but to lie to God is to transgress against a Being who has never sinned! And that was the profound point of the thief on the cross.

Luke 23:39-41, "And one of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at [Jesus], saying, 'Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!' But the other answered, and rebuking him said, 'Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.'"

Every time you are sinned against, the truth is that you just received a very small portion of what you deserve by virtue of your sinfulness! But every time we sin against God, we commit cosmic rebellion against the Creator who by virtue of His creator rights deserves our worship and not our rebellion!

To have been forgiven so much, and yet to be unwilling to forgive someone who has sinned against us so little, is indeed a moral monstrosity! And yet we do this all the time! We are...

- Spoken against.
- Neglected.
- Overlooked.

And rather than, "...forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:32) we grab the brother or sister by the neck; as it were and cast them into prison, in other words, we ride them off and destroy them in our mind (Matthew 5:22)!

How are we to cultivate the heart of forgiveness? Let me give you three suggestions.

- Cultivate a high and so an accurate view of God.

Exodus 20:20, "And Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin.'"

The more we see God for who He is, the more we will reverence Him and so look with sobriety at our sin.

- Strive to hold an accurate view of yourself...

Romans 12:3, "For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith."

How important it is that you and I view ourselves accurately. To misunderstand who God is and to have an over inflated view of self, will always lead us to a life of self-determination where we set ourselves up as judges over people. May God give us the grace to view God as He truly is and ourselves as the sinners that we are.

- Come to know daily the cleansing grace of Christ. In Titus 3:1-2, we are exhorted with this command.

Titus 3:1, 2, "Remind them to be... ready for every good deed, to malign no one, to be uncontentious, gentle, showing every consideration for all men."

Now on what basis does Paul exhort us here?

Titus 3:3-5, "For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit."

If you find that you struggle within your heart to forgive others, you have a problem, yet it is NOT one of forgiveness. It is one of acceptance!

See your problem is that you have yet to accept two things. The reality of your own sinfulness- the fact that your brother's sin against you is no different than the sin you daily excuse \*\*and\*\* the gracious provision of God who after being...

- Betrayed.
- Falsely convicted.
- Beaten.
- Spat upon.
- Unjustly nailed to a cross to die an agonizing death on account of your sin.

Nevertheless cried...

Luke 23:34, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

Oh brothers and sisters do you see that your sin against God is infinitely greater than your brother's transgression and yet God has forgiven you? You are a debtor to mercy and grace? In Christ you have been forgiven 2,777 lifetimes of sin? How can we withhold forgiveness from a brother or sister when we



have been forgiven so much!<sup>5</sup> William Arnot tells the following story to illustrate the importance of forgiveness:

After fording a river, a traveler in Burma discovered that his body was covered with small leeches, busily sucking his blood. His first impulse was to pull them off, but his servant warned him against it, explaining that to do that would leave part of the leeches buried in the skin and cause serious infection. The native prepared a warm bath for the man and added certain herbs to the water that irritated but did not kill the leeches. One by one they voluntarily dropped off.

Each unforgiven injury rankling in the heart is like a leech sucking the life-blood. Mere human determination to have done with it will not cast the evil thing away. You must bathe your whole being in God's pardoning mercy; and those venomous creatures will instantly let go their hold. (MacArthur, 1988, p. 157)

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<sup>5</sup> What about being taken advantage of? Is our forgiveness to be without judgment? NO! God never grants forgiveness to an unrepentant sinner. And how does that translate to us? J. C. Ryle gave a great answer here, "Our Lord does not mean that offenses against the law of the land and the good order of society are to be passed over in silence; he does not mean that we are to allow people to commit thefts and assaults with impunity. All that he means is that we are to study a general spirit of mercy and forgiveness towards our brothers and sisters. We are to bear much, and to put up with much, rather than quarrel; we are to overlook much, and submit to much, rather than have any strife; we are to lay aside everything like malice, strife, revenge and retaliation. Such feelings are only fit for pagans: they are utterly unworthy of a disciple of Christ." (*Matthew*, p. 165)

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10<sup>th</sup> Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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### About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on April 11, 2010. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.