

The Unmerciful Servant

Matthew 18:21-35

A Sermon for Children

With Study Questions

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Introduction

You ever ask a question and, in asking the question, realized you showed your hand? You might ask your mom where the cookies are only to get a fifteen minute explanation on why you shouldn't eat cookies before dinner!

The parable we'll be looking at this morning begins with Peter asking a question. And he probably got more of an answer than he bargained for. Jesus tended to not let the person asking the questions control the discussion. Jesus is going to get to the heart of the issue, and by the time He's done, Peter and the rest of us will be given plenty to think about.

This was Peter's question.

Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times (Matthew 18:21)?"

It's almost as if Peter we shouldn't be too willing to forgive. To forgive *apheso* – means to dismiss, leave behind or send, off as when Jesus sends the multitudes away in Matthew 13:36).

It makes us wonder if Peter had some experience with this. Perhaps he was thinking that Jesus had led a sheltered life. Maybe Peter was thinking "You don't understand Master, there are people who will take advantage of this." Peter mentions seven sins because seven was a number used to describe things that were numerous and repetitive. His question has this "there's got to be a limit" ring to it.

Peter's question tells us something about Peter. And I think it is something common to us all. Although Peter was willing to forgive, his forgiveness carried with it a sense of limitation – as if he were entitled to stop forgiving at a certain point. When somebody has treated us wrongly, it seems very natural for us to say "thus far and no more". Somewhere in the recesses of our mind the words are ringing "I deserve better."

Jesus is about to blow that mentality to smithereens.

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

Today we might say “Should I forgive if sinned against a million times?” To which Jesus’ answer would be “Not a million, but a billion.”

In this parable Jesus is about to explain why that answer makes all the sense in the world. He’s not just going to answer, He’ll explain how we should be thinking when it comes to forgiveness.

Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. ²⁵ But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. ²⁶ The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, ‘Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’ ²⁷ Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ “But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took *him* by the throat, saying, ‘Pay me what you owe!’ ²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’ ³⁰ And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. ³¹ So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. ³² Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. ³³ Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?’ ³⁴ And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. ³⁵ “So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses” (Matthew 18:23-35).

Debts are not Ignored

Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants (Matthew 18:23).

We learn here that the kingdom of God is not a kingdom where people's debts (and by debts we're talking about our sin) are ignored. The king (who is God) has slaves (*doulon*) and he is about settling accounts with them. We should never view our relationship with God as having been reconciled by His ignoring of our sins. The king does not ignore the debt but he settles the account (*sunarai* – can be understood as in the ASV “make a reckoning”). All debts are due and payable).

So, how much do we owe?

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And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. ²⁵ But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made (Matthew 18:24, 25).

The debt is un-payable! A talent was a weight of measure used to determine an amount of money. By one determination the Roman – Attic talent was comprised of 6000 denarii – a denarii was about a day's wages (Matthew 20:2). Ten thousand talents would be 60 million days wages or about 164 thousand years of debt. You get the point. And there is no bankruptcy!

The man will pay (for his sins) forever – if one considers interest, his debt increases at a higher level higher than his payments – to follow the parable this man would owe more every day. Jesus adds to the intimacy of this with a reference to his wife and children – something that during the Roman Empire, when this was written, many of His listeners would have some level of experience. Owing this kind of debt would cost you everything. The Bible talks about our sins this way:

If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand (Psalm 130:3, 4)?

Or another verse:

Truly I know *it is so*, But how can a man be righteous before God? ³ If one wished to contend with Him, He could not answer Him one time out of a thousand (Job 9:2, 3).

In cop shows they'll talk about a criminal who has a rap sheet as long as your arm. We all have a pretty long rap sheet before God. And if God were to interrogate us for every single sin, He would be right every single time. But there is another long list that Bible talks about:

How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How great is the sum of them! ¹⁸ If I should count them, they would be more in number than the sand (Psalm 139:17, 18).

God's thoughts are precious toward those who trust in Him and they outnumber the sand. So the iniquities (sins) that God could mark against us He marked against His own Son instead.

All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:6).

According to Jesus, there will be a day of reckoning. And there is simply not a man who has the financial, moral or intellectual capital sufficient to settle his own account.

With what shall I come before the Lord, *And* bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, With calves a year old? ⁷ Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, Ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn *for* my transgression, The fruit of my body *for* the sin of my soul (Micah 6:6, 7)?

Jesus then teaches that God is compassionate.

A Compassionate Master

The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, ‘Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’²⁷ Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt (Matthew 18:26-27).

Perhaps the later transgression of the servant is related to the foolish promise made here. Certainly he must have realized that he could never pay the debt. But the master is moved with compassion. He is portrayed as one who responds to desperation. And the response exceeds the request.

The man merely asked for patience and time to repay. The wise and merciful master doesn’t set up a payment plan, he cancels the debt. Such mercy, such grace should have transformed every grain of this servant’s heart. Imagine calling the bank to get an extension on your home loan only to find they have cancelled your debt! That is nothing compared to this reprieve. The eternal slavery for him and his family – pardoned!

It is important for us to know that forgiveness comes with a price, a price paid by Jesus at the cross when He died to cleanse of us our sins. But Jesus makes a different point here. He’s going to point out how even though this man was given mercy, he demanded justice.

Justice or Mercy?

But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took *him* by the throat, saying, ‘Pay me what you owe!’²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’³⁰ And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt (Matthew 18:28-30).

The man’s fellow slave owed him much less than he had owed – it was a payable debt (probably three or four months of work). But he becomes vicious; grabbing the man by the throat and demanding payment – something we did not see his master do to him. And when

asked for the same leniency, instead of extending the clemency he had received he threw the man into prison.

I read this parable and at first I think what an ingrate! I marvel at how any man could be so clueless. But then I realize this parable has this strange “you are the man¹” ring to it. How easily we forget the canceled debt. How quickly we cry for justice while we ourselves bask in mercy. How true the hymn which reminds us:

**O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I’m constrained to be!**

Ignore Sin?

Is this to say that it is a godly action to ignore sin? Clearly not! In the parallel account Jesus elucidates:

Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. ⁴ And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him (Luke 17:3, 4).

Over and above us, it is God who is offended at man’s sin and calls men to repent. We work against and unlike God to offer forgiveness without repentance. People should not be under the impression that their sins are swept away without repentance – *metanoese* a changing of the mind and turning away from sin.

Yet at the same time we should not approach our offending brother with our hands around their throat. God forgives us our sins when we repent. But God is also efficiently active in bringing us to repentance – as His children we should seek to imitate both.

¹ From 2 Samuel 12:1-7 when Nathan had told the story of the rich man who had exceeding flocks who took and slaughtered the one ewe lamb owned by a poor man—David was incensed and said that the man should surely die. Nathan then revealed to David that he had been speaking of him and what he had done with Uriah and Bathsheba.

Forgiven as we Forgive

In the Lord's Prayer we pray, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). In Matthew 6:14, 15 we learn that a forgiving disposition is so woven into the fabric saving faith that Jesus teaches,

For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Matthew 16:14, 15).

Important to note that Jesus doesn't say we're forgiven on account of our forgiveness of others, as if we earn forgiveness by being forgiving. Our lack of willingness to forgive simply reveals that we have chosen to operate in a world of merit (what is deserved) rather than grace (what is freely given).

Jesus restates this at the close of this parable where we read of a nightmarish consequence.

So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. ³² Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. ³³ Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' ³⁴ And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. ³⁵ "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses"(Matthew 18:31-35).

A Nightmarish Consequence

The master is very upset with that slave, that after having been forgiven should a great debt, did not extend compassion (*eleesai* – to have mercy, pity and the divinely required kindness we owe one another in mutual relationships – the same Greek verb for both compassion and pity) to his fellow slave.

The parable ends with the nightmarish consequence of the reinstatement of the debt where the unmerciful slave will be tortured forever. Jesus then promises the same consequence for those who are unwilling to forgive, not merely outwardly, but from the heart.

The heart, by the way, does not necessarily mean that you feel like being forgiving, though it should be our desire that it include that. We have limited control over our own passions, but we do have control over our disposition. From the heart means that we have truly and sincerely made a decision to forgive, regardless of how we might feel.

Peter's Answer and the Church's Role

Peter's question has been answered emphatically. Jesus had made it quite clear from the onset of His ministry that His church is to be a refuge for repentant sinners. It can be a tricky business to for both children and adults to stay free from the influence of sinners while at the same time recognizing that church is designed for sinners. Hospitals can't turn away the sick because they carry infection, neither can the body of Christ turn away those who transgress if they are willing to repent.

The blood of Christ is a powerful remedy for a defiled heart. And the church should ever preach this cure for sin that Jesus might draw all men to Himself (John 12:32).

Questions for Study

1. What was Peter's initial question and why do you think he might ask it (page 2, 3)?
2. Are debts/sin ignored in the kingdom of heaven (pages 3, 4)?
3. What is our debt before God (pages 4, 5)?
4. How did the master's response exceed the slave's request (page 6)?
5. How did the slave react to his fellow slave and what would be an example of that in our lives (pages 6, 7)?
6. Should there be forgiveness without repentance? Explain (page 7).
7. Do we earn our forgiveness by forgiving others? Explain (page 8).
8. What is the role of the church (page 9)?