

# Mysteries of the Kingdom - Matthew 18:23-35

## Forgiveness and the Unmerciful Servant

Before the Reformation had begun, Martin Luther was once in the confessional. He was weeping over his sin and the young priest was unsure what to say. Finally, the priest began quoting the Apostle's Creed: I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ His only son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the . . .

"WAIT," cried Luther. "What did you say?" The priest said, "Excuse me?" Luther said, "that last part, what was it?" "Oh, I said I believe in the forgiveness of sins." Luther slowly repeated each word; "the...forgiveness...of...sins." "Then there is hope for me. There is a way to God," he said. And that was the beginning of the Reformation!

The forgiveness of God is perhaps the greatest thing we have ever experienced. And when we think of forgiveness, those are the terms we tend to think in – God forgiving us. But there is a whole other aspect to forgiveness; not so much God's forgiveness of us as our forgiveness of each other! This Scripture teaches us some important lessons in that regard.

Notice first the **context of the parable**. I remember a saying I learned in college: "every text without a context is a pretext." Indeed if you take certain texts out of their contexts you can really distort the meaning. One man needing guidance in a matter once prayed and asked God to lead him to a verse. "Show me what to do," he said as he opened his Bible, which fell to Matthew 27:5, a passage describing Judas that said, "so he departed and went and hanged himself." He said, "no, that won't do." So he tried again and this time he came to Luke 10:37, a verse that says, "go and do likewise." He became exasperated and said, "I better give this one more try," so he opened once again and came to John 13:27 which reads, "what you are about to do, do quickly."

Obviously, used out of context these verses do not provide the needed direction! Jesus' parables are often linked to specific questions. In Matthew 20, the parable of the householder is linked to Peter's question, "what shall we have?" It is the same here - this parable is linked to another question of Peter. Note v. 21: "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"

So the context clearly indicates for us that this is a parable dealing with forgiveness. Our tendency is to think the parable pictures God's forgiveness of us. I think this is in the background by suggestion. Yet the parable intends to picture man's forgiveness of man. Remember, the context is Peter's question! He does not ask "how often will God forgive me," but rather, "how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?" So, while there are elements here that picture the forgiveness of God, we must be careful not to push the analogy too far for that is not the primary picture the parable presents!

Perhaps we tend to look down on Peter. How could he continue to ask questions and misread Jesus? But at least Peter was asking! Can that be said of us? Are we concerned

enough about our spiritual condition to ask? Do we feel a closeness of relationship to God to ask such personal, intimate questions of Him? Or do we rather shrug out shoulders and say, "oh well, who knows?" or worse, "who cares?"

Look again at the question that forms the context. How many times? Peter asked. The rabbis had said three times was the maximum a person needed to forgive another. It is almost as though Peter is saying, "Lord I'll do more than twice what's required!" In response, Jesus says, not seven but seventy times seven - or, as some translations have it, seventy-seven. Which is it; 77 or 490? The Greek allows for either reading. It is not a point of 77 or 490. In either case if you were to stick to that number, forgiveness would become a habit. I think perhaps Jesus had another Scripture in mind. Genesis 4:24: "If Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold." Here Lamech is clamoring for unlimited vengeance. But Jesus says forgiveness is what should be unlimited! It is not a question of arithmetic, Peter! It is a question of conduct. Forgiveness should be a habit for kingdom citizens. And to illustrate that He tells the parable.

So notice next the **content of the parable**. As we read the parable we are presented with a man in great debt to a king. The king desired to balance the books, so to speak. How much was he owed? It is interesting to me to note the attempts of commentators to determine the amount. J.M. Boice says, if this is a talent of gold the debt is equivalent to \$3,600,000,000. Warren Wiersbe says the debt would be \$10,000,000. He goes on to tell how it took twenty years to earn one talent, and this man owed 10,000! Herbert Lockyer estimates that this debt was about \$150,000,000. We could go to other commentators and get other estimates as well!

The point is not really how much was the debt. It does not matter which one you use - pick one, allow for 2000 years of inflation, and well, the picture is clear. This debt is so large it is unpayable. Not even Bill Gates could pay this thing back!

But just as the king is about to execute justice, the man pleads for mercy. Notice carefully his plea in v. 26: "Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything." We will come back to this in a moment - just notice it now! A mother once approached Napoleon and sought a pardon for her son. Napoleon said he had committed a certain offense twice and justice demanded death. "But I do not ask for justice, I plead for mercy," she said. "But your son does not deserve mercy," Napoleon replied. "Sir," the woman cried, "it would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask for." "Well, then," the emperor said, "I will have mercy." And he spared the woman's son.

That is exactly what the king did here in the parable. He simply had mercy. Not because the man deserved it, but because the king was a merciful individual. Oh, how we need to emulate the character of this king. Let me ask you today friend, what kind of character do you possess when wronged? Many live by the creed, "I don't get mad - I get even!" Warren Wiersbe says, "The world's worst prison is the prison of an unforgiving heart. If we refuse to forgive others, then we are only imprisoning ourselves and causing our own torment. Some of the most miserable people I have met in my ministry have been people who would not forgive others. They lived only to imagine ways to punish these people who had wronged them. But they were really only punishing themselves."

Not this king - he had mercy. Verse 27 says he was moved with compassion. The Greek word that is used is *splachna*. It is a word that relates to the bowels. That is perhaps difficult for us to understand, but it is how the Greeks expressed emotion. It is similar today to

how we use the word heart. We say something really touches our heart - they would say it touched their bowels!

But once this servant is released, notice what happens. He finds a man who owes him a debt: 100 pence (KJV) according to v. 28. Again, commentators have ranges of how much this is. The smallest amount I saw was \$12. I also saw \$44, as well as other suggestions. The Greek literally says 100 denarii, hence 100 day's wages. This would be about four months worth of work or so; a large sum but certainly payable!

Notice that he demands payment. And look at what he hears in v. 29: "Have patience with me and I will repay you!" Remember his words in 26? He hears the same words he had spoken himself. Yet he who had been forgiven was unwilling to forgive. Now, I would like to tell you that this is how it is in the world, but we church folks are different. Unfortunately, I am afraid it is just as true within the church as without. Many an individual in church today will mouth the words, "forgive us our debts" while in their hearts there will be hatred, enmity, vengeance, and all manner of retribution planned! Consider the greatest wrong ever done to you, or even a wrong that has been done recently to you. Think a moment about that. Now I ask - what will you do about it? Are you going to let them get away with it? Are you going to get back or will you forgive? Well, you had better forgive because forgiveness is a kingdom attitude. That is not easy to do, I know. I much prefer justice to grace. But let me tell you, I am glad God is a God of grace when it comes to how He relates to me!

But our parable is not finished. I wish Jesus had stopped here and made the application, but He does not do that. Notice what happens next. The king hears about it and calls the man back. He reminds him of what he did for him in v. 32. Then asks in v. 33, "should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave?" Notice the word mercy here. It is translated compassion in the KJV. Remember v. 27? The word compassion appeared there as well, but it was a different word. This difference is captured by the NASB with the use of compassion in v. 27 and mercy in v. 33. Here in v. 33, Jesus does not speak of *splachna*, but *eleeo*. It means simply to have mercy. The difference is not one of result but of degree. In both, mercy is extended. But *splachna* comes from deep within. *Eleeo* is simply an outward act. The contrast is astounding - the king had *splachna*, but the man could not even have *eleeo*. As a result, "his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him" (v. 34). Now, what is that all about?

Well, notice finally the **commentary on the parable**. Verse 35 is not so much a part of the parable as it is Jesus' commentary on the parable. What is this saying? Does it teach us that God will forgive us, but if we do not in turn forgive that God will send us to hell? NO - that would certainly contradict the rest of scripture. Remember, the parable is NOT about salvation. It is about forgiveness between brothers. That is why I cautioned earlier that we cannot press analogies too far. As much as we want to see the king as being God and ourselves as being people forgiven of a great debt we could not pay, the fact remains, that is not what the parable is about. It is certainly true that sin is an astounding debt we could never pay. But folks, it was not simply forgiven *carte blanche* like in this parable. It took the death of God's only Son for that forgiveness to be possible.

The parable, in response to Peter's "how often" question simply says that there are no conditions. The amount does not matter. The frequency does not matter. In fact, NOTHING matters for forgiveness is unconditional among kingdom citizens. And if we cannot forgive unconditionally we prove ourselves to NOT be citizens of the kingdom. In other words, forgiveness is NOT optional for the believer!

One of the email lists I am on recently dealt with the issue of forgiveness. The question was asked, "if a man sins against a brother and is unrepentant, will God forgive him? What if the person sinned against forgives him?" The man writing the column answered as follows:

*It is difficult for me to conceive of God forgiving someone who has deliberately and knowingly sinned against another person but who neglects or refuses to seek forgiveness by repenting, assuming the opportunity is available. Jesus taught that should we sin against another, we are to go to that person and seek reconciliation. I think it fair to say that God will forgive those who forgive others, just as He shows mercy toward those who are merciful toward others.*

*Is it possible for the offended person to forgive the one who sinned against him prior to the offending person seeking reconciliation? Some say yes; others say no. I have a problem with this aspect of forgiveness. Just how may a person forgive someone of a wrong who has not demonstrated regretfulness? . . .*

Then the author asks a pointed question:

*At what point did God forgive you and me? Was it before or after we sought His face and reformed our lives? The potential for forgiveness was announced when Jesus paved the way and shed His blood on a Roman cross. But just when does it become a reality? When Jesus asked His Father to 'forgive them because they don't know what they're doing,' were they forgiven at that moment or when they sought His face and repented?*

It is a good question. But let us distinguish between God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of each other. God does not forgive us because we forgive each other! God forgives us because we repent of our sin and turn to Christ. Yet our willingness or unwillingness (as the case may be) to forgive others, while it does not DETERMINE our spiritual condition does certainly DEMONSTRATE it! That is what v. 35 is really all about! We reveal the true condition of our hearts by the way we treat others. When we are humble and repentant, we gladly forgive our brothers. But where there is pride and a desire for revenge, there has been no true repentance. And, as a very sad result, God cannot forgive!

The parables of Jesus are so rich! We learn so much from this one, but let me simply conclude by summarizing three truths. First, there is a judgment coming! The man in the parable was judged - so will we all be. Second, there is forgiveness available. God's forgiveness of sin is much greater than this debt. If God can forgive us of all we are guilty of, how much more should we forgive each other? Finally, the only sure proof of salvation is a transformed heart and life. This man's life was not. How about yours?