

The Parable of the Unmerciful Slave
Matthew 18:21-35
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Matthew 18 involves the training of the disciples by Jesus in ministry. This has involved ensuring that the followers of Christ are not caused to stumble in their faith, by how to serve a sinning brother, and in this last section, the importance of forgiveness. This is based upon the words of Jesus in Matthew 18:14, *“it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish.”*

Matthew 18:21-35 describes the response to people who have professed repentance. It provides the appropriate context for the discipline process of those who have engaged in rebellion against God in the church. The goal is to restore the sinful brother, and any true restoration involves forgiveness.

Peter asks a pragmatic question (18:21)

We can tell that Peter followed the instruction of Jesus regarding church discipline because verse 21 begins with “then.” Peter projected the potential practice of church discipline into cases where there might be subsequent repentance over the same sin. Because Peter came to Jesus with the question *“how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?”* we can surmise that he is asking on behalf of the disciples. This is supported by Jesus’ broad answer that would apply to all of them.

The leading rabbis had debated this question of forgiveness and had generally concluded that a person might be forgiven for a repeated sin up to three times, but no more. Therefore, Peter’s question was particularly gracious, from his perspective, going further than religious leaders. This was likely because Jesus had already taught the importance of forgiveness in Matthew 6:14-15, *“For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.”*

Since Peter valued the need for forgiveness, he extended the possibility to more than double what others would say. His second question, *“up to seven times?”* would seem extremely forgiving. The number seven was a common, or perfect number (Leviticus 26:21; Deuteronomy 28:25; Psalm 79:12; Proverbs 24:16). It would seem to Peter that anything beyond seven times would be impossible to consider a sinful person as being sincere in their repentance, or else the lapse back into sin would have ended.

Jesus answers with a hyperbolic statement (18:22)

Jesus' response corrected Peter, *"I do not say to you, up to seven times."* If Jesus did not agree with Peter's limit of seven times, then He also did not agree with the religious leaders who set the limit at three times. In spite of how gracious Peter may have felt he was being, Jesus went much further.

The NASB, along with the KJV translate Jesus' statement as *"but up to seventy times seven"* while the ESV and NIV read, *"but seventy-seven times."* Since Jesus quoted verbatim the Septuigent translation of Genesis 4:24, *"If Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold,"* it is better to view this number in the same way. Jesus told Peter to forgive up to seventy-sevenfold, that is seventy-seven times.

Obviously, this is not a specific number but is rather a hyperbole to mean that forgiveness should be extended without limits. None of us could keep track of seventy-seven cycles of sin and repentance.

Indeed, not keeping track of such a thing is the very point that Jesus made. His words communicate that there must be no limit or qualification to forgiveness. To limit forgiveness of a brother would contradict His words *"whoever receives one such child in my name receives me"* (Matthew 18:5) and *"See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven"* (Matthew 18:10).

Jesus answers with a parabolic story (18:23-34)

To support these words about unconditional forgiveness, Jesus taught the parable of the unmerciful slave. When Jesus said *"the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king,"* He described how those of us who will populate the kingdom of heaven should have the same characteristic of mercy as the king in the parable exhibits. This quality that will describe the kingdom of heaven should be manifested in Christ's disciples today, who live under the authority of Christ.

This parable is about forgiveness, specifically why forgiveness should be unlimited. The king in the parable, as is the norm in parables, represents God. The slaves represent the people in his realm. The accounts that must be settled represent the debt of sin of each one of us.

The size of the slave's debt was *"ten thousand talents"* (18:24). A talent was a unit of measure, roughly about 75-100 pounds. This reference referred to the weight in silver. Ten thousand talents would be about 750,000-1,000,000 pounds of silver.

To put this in today's terms, we could take the market price of silver (currently around \$30/ounce) and calculate ten thousand talents as between \$360 million and \$480 million dollars. But this would underestimate the economic worth in the first century.

David donated seven thousand talents of silver and others added ten thousand talents of silver for the construction of the temple (1 Chronicles 29:4, 7). Given that football stadiums are being built today for \$5 billion dollars, we get another sense of the value of the debt of the slave.

The best way to understand the value of ten thousand talents in today's term is to recognize how much work would be required to earn one talent. As a unit of currency, one talent was equal to 6,000 denarii. A denarius was the normal wage for one day's worth of labor. Therefore, ten thousand talents, would be sixty million days of work, or with an eight hour work day, 480 million man-hours. If a person worked at minimum wage, the value before taxes would be close to eight billion dollars. Working five days a week, a laborer would take 230 years to amass ten thousand talents.

The debt was not only impossible for any normal person to pay, the point of this parable is not the specific amount of the debt. This is because Jesus chose the largest unit of currency and ten thousand is the largest numeral in the Greek language of the time. There was no larger sum that could be communicated in this story. To put this in our colloquial language, the size of this debt was in the gazillions.

The slave obviously did not have the means to repay this debt so the king ordered him to be sold, along with his family and his property. This also would not come close to repayment of the debt. The best slave would only bring in one talent, and a common slave would be worth one-tenth of that amount.

Therefore, this claim puts verse 26 into perspective, *"the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.'"* This plea was absurd. He knew what he was promising was completely impossible to deliver.

In spite of the impossibility of repayment, and a disingenuous offer to repay by the slave, the king *"felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt."* The degree of mercy shown by the king cannot be overstated. The term used for debt in verse 27 is literally a "loan," indicating that the king chose not to view the slave as guilty of embezzlement, but that it could be repaid.

Next in the parable, the slave that had been forgiven had a debt owed to him by another slave. This one hundred denarii debt was not insignificant, for it would be the worth of one hundred days of labor. However, this pales in comparison to the debt that the king had forgiven him.

There are several contrasts between the conduct of the king and the conduct of the slave. The amount owed is vastly different. The willingness of the slave to engage in physical violence is unlike the king. The lack of compassion by the slave when the one in debt also fell to the ground and used the same plea as he had used with the king, *“have patience with me and I will repay you”* (18:26, 29) is another difference with the king.

Rather than exercising forgiveness, the slave threw his fellow slave into a debtor’s prison. It was illegal to sell a slave for greater than his debt and even the cheapest slave could be sold for more than five times the debt. The slave could have chosen forgiveness, but he chose to ruthlessly demand every part of the debt that he was owed.

In the third scene of this parable, the other fellow slaves saw they were *“deeply grieved”* (NASB) or better put, were *“greatly distressed”* at the actions taken by the forgiven slave. These fellow slaves were certainly aware of the degree of forgiveness the man had received, and could easily see his provoking hypocrisy. They *“reported to their lord all that had happened.”* In their distress and indignation, they gave a complete description of what had happened.

This report led the king to summon the slave saying, *“You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?”* Clearly, this slave is considered wicked for his hypocrisy. Also, the lord no longer used the word “loan” to describe the debt (18:27, 32), taking a different view of what the slave had owed him.

The king then *“handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him.”* The ESV and NIV use the term “jailers,” which downplays this term, which means “jailers assigned to torture prisoners” (BASANISTAIS). Since it would take this wicked slave a few lifetimes of labor to repay his debt, he would endure torture for the remainder of his life.

In the end of this account, the wicked slave ends up being treated in the same way that he had treated his fellow slave. This reminds us of the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, *“For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you”* (Matthew 7:2).

Jesus answers with an emphatic stipulation (18:35)

Parables are focused on a main point and Jesus stated this point of the parable of the unmerciful servant in verse 35. In case the point of this parable is not clear to all, Jesus summarizes the direct application, *“My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.”* This is the parallel statement to Jesus' words in Matthew 6:14-15, *“For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.”*

There is a clear parallel between the lord of the parable and the Lord God. Just as the lord in this parable forgave unconditionally an indescribable debt, so too the Lord has forgiven His people of an incalculable debt of sin. When the lord of the parable was merciful, the wicked servant was ungrateful. If we are ungrateful for the enormous degree of mercy the Lord has shown to us, it demonstrates our wickedness. The evidence of our gratefulness for the mercy that God has shown us is seen in when we forgive our brother.

Paul communicated this inherent relationship between God's forgiveness of us, and our forgiveness of our brother in Ephesians 4:32, *“Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.”* Forgiveness is kind and tender-hearted, not simply transactional. This is why Jesus included the phrase *“from your heart”* in verse 35. Forgiveness includes our attitude toward our brothers.

As with Matthew 6:14-15, this is not teaching that God's forgiveness is earned by our practice of forgiveness. In the parable, as well as in the other teachings of Scripture, forgiveness is granted by the unilateral act of the Lord. Those who truly believe in Christ will manifest their faith through their forgiveness of others, because forgiveness is at the core of salvation.

There is no contradiction with God's forgiveness and God's judgment. God grants forgiveness to those He leads to faith, and those who believe desire to forgive, just as God in Christ has forgiven them. Those without faith will enter into eternal judgment.

Any sense of the magnitude and significance of our forgiveness by Jesus Christ will necessarily move us toward extending forgiveness to others. It is impossible to truly understand our salvation and advocate withholding forgiveness without being hypocritical. To withhold forgiveness is to lack faith in God.

Conclusion

The context of Matthew 18:21-35 is church discipline (18:15-20). Those who are repentant are the ones who God has forgiven, for repentance is descriptive of a true disciple of Christ. This is why, in Luke's Great Commission in Luke 24:46-47, Jesus said to His disciples, *"Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem."* It is repentance that leads to life (Acts 11:18).

Those who repent of their sins must be received. To not receive a repentant brother in Christ is sinful. *"And whoever receives one such child in My name receives me; but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea"* (Matthew 18:5-6).

Our forgiveness of one another ought to be as God in Christ has forgiven us. The Lord forgave us in spite of the magnitude of our debt. The Lord forgave even for the sins that we have forgotten about. The Lord forgave us for even the sins that we committed unintentionally (it is possible to sin unintentionally—Leviticus 4:2,22,27). The Lord forgave even the sins that we were unaware that we have committed (it is possible to sin without being aware of it being sinful—Leviticus 5:17).

Therefore, we cannot hold our brother to a standard of confession and remorse that the Lord does not demand from us. When the Lord forgives us over and over again, even when we commit the same sin repeatedly, we must forgive one another in this same way. Like a person who continues to sin and ask forgiveness over and over, leading people to question their sincerity, we cannot make judgments regarding their sincerity, for God alone knows the heart.

Forgiveness does not mean that we forget the sin ever happened, but that we receive the brother and accept him, from our heart. There may be times, for the sake of the person and the church, that they may not be able to participate in some ministries. However, our relationship with them is fully restored. We seek for their good and receive them in fellowship. This is imperative due to the extent of our own forgiveness.

Those who understand the magnitude of their own forgiveness will respond lovingly toward their brothers in Christ. In the words of Jesus to a prostitute, *"For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little"* (Luke 7:47).