

**Parable of the Unmerciful Slave**  
**Matthew 18:21-35**  
**Pastor John E. Dubler**

Here is a parable about unlimited personal forgiveness. Indeed, if we will not forgive as the Lord commands us, we prove ourselves incapable of receiving forgiveness from the Lord. In this parable we discover that all of us have been forgiven much more than we will ever forgive. Or, as Max Lucado put it, “You will never forgive anyone more than God has already forgiven you.”

The text of the Parable of the Unmerciful Slave, Matthew 18:21-35:

Then Peter came and said to Him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. 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. So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.’ And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. 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.’ So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you.’ But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. Then summoning him, his lord said to him, ‘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?’ And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.”<sup>1</sup>

The passage opens with Peter’s magnanimous answer to his own self-serving question: “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times? Rabbinic tradition indicates that one was obligated to forgive a sin by a fellow Jew up to three times. But if the man persisted by sinning in the same way a fourth time there would be no more forgiveness. This is the principle of limited and conditional forgiveness. Jesus is preaching unlimited and unconditional and even unilateral forgiveness.

But perhaps Peter was by this question giving vent with the lips to a heart that thought of itself a little more highly than was proper. Certainly the dangers of reading between the lines to

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<sup>1</sup> New American Standard Updated Version.

ascertain and judge the motives of Peter may be a good example of the presumptuous judging the vainglorious. But since Peter was not known for mousy self-consciousness, we might not be going far wrong here to find conceit in such a magnanimous proposal of forgiving up to seven times. For whatever reason, Peter chose to answer his own question to the Lord (always a dangerous practice) by suggesting that one should forgive up to seven times. Here is a nice round number that should be appealing to anyone with a knowledge of Biblical numerology.<sup>2</sup>

The Lord's response no doubt stunned and perhaps even stung Peter. "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven." The mathematically inclined will tally up the total and find that we must forgive the offending brother 490 times—and that for the same kind of offence. But of course Jesus did not envision a limitation, no matter how large the number. He responds to Peter's "round" number with one even more perfect in symmetry but with infinite meaning. Seventy times seven—in other words, without limit.

Biblical commentators see here a throwback to Lamech's vengeful unforgiveness and unlimited revenge. A man wounded him—he is not repaid in like manner, wound for wound. Rather, Lamech killed the man who only wounded him. A boy struck him. He killed the boy. He boasts that his vengeance will be seventy-seven fold. Lamech's scorched policy is one of unlimited vengeance. But Jesus demands unlimited forgiveness and leaving vengeance to God. Indeed the contrast could not be more stark:

Adah and Zillah,  
Listen to my voice,  
You wives of Lamech,<sup>3</sup>  
Give heed to my speech,  
For I have killed a man for wounding me;  
And a boy for striking me;  
If Cain is avenged sevenfold,  
Then Lamech seventy-sevenfold.  
Genesis 4:23-24

I do not say to you, up to seven times,  
but up to seventy times seven.  
Matthew 18:22



This is more evidence of how Jesus made the law glorious. He sets no new upper limit, rather his message is unlimited forgiveness, even on a unilateral basis. David DuPlessis, the old preacher of Pentecost preached and lived forgiveness. He used to wear a small lapel pin that conveyed Jesus' perfect answer in a simple two numbers with the multiplication sign: 70 x 7. I wish often that I could find or have made many such 70 x 7 lapel pins. It would serve to remind me of the glorious answer Jesus gave to Peter, and to endeavor to live what in my heart I truly love. [Illustration: Here is a 70 x 7 necklace that I found on e-Bay. It is unlike the one DuPlessis used to wear, but from this one can get the idea.]

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<sup>2</sup> Seven though uneven, should for all practical purposes be considered a "round" or complete number from the perspective of the Bible. Seventy times seven would be considered very complete.

<sup>3</sup> Lamech was the first person mentioned in the Bible to take more than one wife. He is the father of bigamy.

## **Elements of the parable.**

**Size of the slave's debt:** The slave owes his king a monstrous sum of 10,000 talents. The unit of measure here is a talent by weight and not a talent gold or silver coin. Coinage was not invented until the xx century BC. In today's value the amount owed cannot be precisely calculated or estimated, but educated guesses and approximations vary among Bible scholars from 12 million to over a billion dollars. King David donated 3,000 talents of gold and 7,000 talents of silver for the building and furnishing of the soon-to-be built temple. David's nobles as a group donated 5,000 talents of gold and 10,000 talents of silver for the same cause. (See 1 Chronicles 9:4,7.)

**The impossibility to repay:** The amount does not really matter, as long as it is understood by the reader that the sum is indeed immense. It would be virtually impossible for the slave to repay what was owed, as he promised to do. The king at first commands the slave to be sold along with his family. A top-notch male slave in his prime would fetch perhaps one talent. However one-tenth that amount would be far more common. Assuming that the slave might have a wife and as many as ten children and allowing for a very generous evaluation of five talents for the entire lot, the slave still has no hope of repaying any more than 0.05% of the debt. Despite this, the slave promises to repay all. Here indeed is a prime example of what it means to trust in one's own works for salvation. There is no hope that we can be saved in a works for righteousness scheme.

The phrase "to settle accounts" is literally to "take account of" from the Greek phrase συνᾶραι λόγον μετὰ (sunairei logon meta, and means to compare accounts. It is a bookkeeping phrase and indicates that a thorough examination of the books was being conducted. It is not used of a shallow look but a thorough perusal.<sup>4</sup> This phrase reminds us that a judgment time is coming for all believers (The Judgment Seat of Christ,) where we shall give an account of how we handled the talents given us and whether we were obedient to the Lord's commands. Our eternal salvation is not being judged at the Judgment Seat of Christ, or our sins. As born-again believers, we are not subject to the penalty for sin, which is death, since Jesus, through his substitutionary sacrifice has paid the price for us. It is our works that will be judged. (See 2 Corinthians 5:10 and 1 Corinthians 3:12-15.)

**The compassion of the king.** The king has compassion bigger than the biggest debt imaginable. He even looks with compassion on this man who was trying to pay his own way. The entire debt is canceled. He feels compassion for the slave and releases him from the debt.

**The slave's lack of mercy.** The newly forgiven slave goes out and finds one of his fellow slaves who owes him 100 denarii. This sum is not insignificant or paltry, but by comparison it is nothing. A denarius amounted to one day's wages for a laborer or soldier. It was the minimum wage of the day. In the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, the owner of the vineyard agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day. If we were to estimate the value of

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<sup>4</sup> For a more complete 'accounting' of the phrase see R. Renner, *Sparkling Gems From the Greek*, (Tulsa, 2003), p. 184.

what was owed to the unmerciful slave by his fellow slave, based on today's minimum wage, the indebtedness would be \$4,680.00.<sup>5</sup>

Even though the fellow slave appealed to the unmerciful slave on the same terms he himself used to appeal to the king, and almost in the same words, he refuses to show mercy. In fact, he demands that his fellow slave be sent to debtor's prison. There he would have no opportunity to work off the debt. The entire burden would fall upon his family and perhaps a few friends to pay the debt and secure his release.

**The attitude of the fellow slaves.** The other slaves who were witness to these things were deeply grieved and shocked. They were so deeply affected by this enormous and egregious incongruity that they appeal to the highest level of authority—the king himself. The text notes that they “came and reported” the unmerciful slave's action to the king, being in deep distress. The Greek for “reported,” διεσαφησαν (diesaphesan) is a strong verb meaning “explained in detail.” It is used twice in New Testament, here and in Matthew 13:36, where the disciples ask Jesus about the Parable of the Tares and Wheat, saying, “*explain* to us the parable of the tares of the field.” It is very sobering that if we do not forgive, those who observe our failure to forgive will appeal to higher authority in prayer. They will “report” in excruciating detail, knowing that our King, who has vacated the death sentence that was against us, will deal with our refusal to forgive an offense which is much more insignificant, and not deserving of death.

The heart condition of the unmerciful slave. The king declares him not to be unwise, insensitive or hard but “wicked.” And whereas the king was willing to forgive, now that he sees the unmerciful slave's wicked heart he has a change of attitude. His speech to the unmerciful one reveals what we should do when wronged and what will happen if we don't do it.

‘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?’

The message is clear-cut and simple, really. No technicalities, no conditions or quibbling. We must forgive and show mercy to others in the same way we have received mercy from our Lord.

**Handed over to the torturers.** If we will not forgive there remains only one bleak prospect for us: torture.

And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him.”

When we do not forgive we are tortured continually by our thoughts. What our “fellow slaves” owe us is paraded before our eyes from daybreak to daybreak, and whether at meals or entertainments there is never any true release. We are constantly plagued by their wrong-doing, meditating on it, turning it over and over in our hearts. The sum owed us is never far from our thoughts and meditations. When we pray, the face of our debtors is brought up before us by the Holy Spirit who is nudging us to forgive. The heavens are brass and even our relationships with

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<sup>5</sup> In 2007 the minimum wage was increased a total of \$2.10. The first increment takes effect in the summer of 2007 making the minimum wage \$5.85.

the ones we love the most in this life are poisoned. Even our physical man is affected, digestion turning sour, muscles stiff and faces lined with bitterness. Friend and lover avoid us and our sleep is beset by fitful dreams.

The Greek word for torturers is βασανισταίς basanistais. This means one who actually tortures another, not a mere jailer. The torturers will continue torturing until we pay back all we owe. Since the magnitude of our debt is so profound that it merits the death penalty, there is no way we can repay it all even if we want to, not in a thousand lifetimes. Therefore we will be tortured forever.

There is a way, however, to escape the torturers forever: forgive. Forgive every offense. Declare in your heart that you are owed nothing. Forgive without hope of any repentance or repayment on the part of the one that owes you. Forgive unilaterally.

Jesus, commenting on the parable he has just told them, says:

“My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.”

No one is exempt from these words of warning. God is a God of compassion and mercy. We are to follow Him in his mercy. Those who are forgiven **MUST** forgive. And if they will not forgive, they show themselves incapable of receiving forgiveness.

III. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

A. Matthew 6: 14-15. Praying for forgiveness and forgiving is central to the gospel message of our Lord Jesus. It is a part of the core of His teaching—The Sermon on the Mount.

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  
(Matthew 6:14-15).

B. Mark 11:22-26 repeats the injunction and links the matter of forgiveness to answers to prayer.

And Jesus answered saying to them, “Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him. Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you. Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions. [But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions.] Mark 11: 22-26