

## 5. The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

(Matt 18: 21- 35)

As we journey through the parables of Christ, we are looking for the ways in which Jesus opens up the mysteries of the Kingdom of God through these stories and images. While a parable may seem simple on the surface, for those who have ears to hear, there is a much deeper message.

In the eighteenth chapter of St. Matthew's gospel, we learn that one day, Jesus was talking with His disciples about forgiveness. We read,

Then Peter came to Him and said, "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."

(Matthew 18: 21 - 22)

Peter asks how many times he should forgive someone, and suggests seven times, because that seems like a lot of times to him. There are seven days in a week, and the number seven in the Bible often describes things that are complete, like a full week is complete, and like how God completely created the world in seven days. Peter is thinking that there should be a pretty big number of times to forgive a person, and to him, seven sounds big.

But Jesus tells Peter that it's not just 7 times, but  $70 \times 7$ ! Technically, that calculates to 490 times, but Jesus is not saying that you should count how many times you forgive and then stop forgiving at 490. He is saying take your biggest number guess, and then multiply it by so many more to get a huge number! He is telling you that the number may be so high that there isn't really even a limit at all.

He could leave it at that, just answering Peter that you should keep on forgiving people, but instead He tells a story. He has already let us know that we should be very forgiving, but there is more for us to understand. He uses a parable to help us see why we need to forgive others:

Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. 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.

The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt.

"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!' So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt.

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. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him.

"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)

So there is a king who wants to settle accounts. That means that some of his servants owe him money, and he has decided that now it's time for people to pay what they owe him. One of the servants owes him really a lot of money: ten thousand talents! Talents are money, and ten thousand is truly a lot of money.

The servant did not actually have ten thousand talents, so he couldn't pay the king. But the king really wanted his money, so he decided to sell this servant and his wife and his kids to get the money! How awful!

The servant was desperate. He threw himself at the king's feet and begged him not to do it. He said, "have patience with me, and I will pay you all." If the king could just wait, the man would find a way to get that money and give it to the king.

The king was moved with compassion -- which means that he saw the suffering of this servant, and he felt in his own heart some pity and love for this man, so he did something to help fix it, to relieve that suffering. Because the king is loving, he lets the man go free and does not sell him or his family; he does not insist on getting his money back right away. The king is more

than patient, he is merciful and kind: he forgives the servant his debt, which means that the servant didn't own him any money anymore! He just made that huge debt, that ten thousand talents, simply disappear like it never existed. He decided never to ask for that money back, and to give his servant a wonderful fresh start.

Can you imagine how good this must have felt? Over the years, the servant must have known that he owed a large amount of money and that he really could not pay it. He must have worried a lot about how to solve that problem, and then when the king said he and his family would be sold, he must have been so distressed! But then, to have the king agree not just to wait a while, but to just completely erase the debt and solve the problem. Being forgiven that debt must have felt so good. He could finally relax after all of that worry and fear.

Suddenly released from this terrible burden, the servant leaves the king and where does he go?

To the amazement and dismay of everyone, he goes out and finds another servant who owes him some money. It's not ten thousand talents -- it's a much, much smaller amount of money: just one hundred denarii. According to the Bishop Epiphanius, who lived just a few hundred years after Christ, one talent was equal to one hundred denarii. So while the first servant owed the master ten thousand talents, this other servant only owed him one talent. The first servant's debt was 10,000 times more than the second! And his debt was forgiven, and he was free!

But when he found the servant who owed him one hundred denarii, just one talent, he took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!' Can you imagine how scared this man must have been? He did not have money to pay his debt, and he fell down at his feet and begged, saying the exact same words the first servant had said to the king: 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' But where the king was not just patient, but truly kind and compassionate, and saw his servant's suffering and fixed it, the servant who had been forgiven was not. He showed no patience or mercy, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt.

When the unmerciful servant begged for the king to be patient, the king was patient and much more than that -- he was loving, and he forgave a huge debt. But when the other servant begged this man to be patient, he was not compassionate and loving like the king. In fact, he was not even just patient, and he refused to forgive even that tiny debt and threw the man into prison! He did not even try to be like his king had been; he did not show love to this other servant, though so much love was shown to him.

When the king learned that this servant did not offer the same kind of forgiveness that he had received, he was angry, called him wicked, and the forgiveness of that enormous debt disappeared -- now he would be tortured until he paid it all back! He had been shown mercy and forgiven his debt, but when he was unmerciful, his debt returned! All of the forgiveness vanished.

But then Jesus reveals that, like all parables, this story is not quite as simple as it seems. Yes, it is about people owing money to each other, and whether or not we forgive those debts or decide to be harsh and collect the money. This parable, for those who have ears to hear, is also about something larger. He says, "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses." The parable is not about money, but about forgiving sins. Peter has asked how much he should forgive, and this is his answer.

If we were to tell the story using the word sins instead of money, we might say that these servants are the servants of God. (Do you think of receiving communion when you hear that phrase? Our priests may call us servants or handmaidens of God all the time!) The first servant has 10,000 sins, and God, our heavenly King, could punish him forever and ever and still not punish him enough for all the terrible things he has done! But the man prays to God, asking Him to forgive, and God shows him love and mercy and compassion. He is forgiven and allowed to go on with his life without being eternally punished for every bad thing he has ever done.

Now another servant of God, another person, has done something to offend him; he has hurt this man in some way. Though that sin is just the one sin -- far fewer than the many sins this man was forgiven -- he refuses to forgive! He doesn't show mercy and love, but instead he stays angry and mad. He punishes and punishes the other person for the one sin, when he himself has been loved and forgiven for so many sins.

This story is for us. We have all committed sins. We have said things in anger, we have acted unfairly, we have been unkind and impatient. But God loves us anyway and He forgives us. Are we grateful for that forgiveness? Do we learn from God's love and become more loving ourselves? Or do we accept God's forgiveness and then refuse to be forgiving in our own hearts?

If we cannot be forgiving, we cannot be forgiven. It's not that God is being mean, it's just how it is. A forgiving heart can receive forgiveness, but an unforgiving heart never really receives forgiveness.

Here's an interesting thing: your spiritual heart works this way with forgiveness, and also your real, physical bodily heart works this way with blood! We call it your circulatory system, and basically your heart has arteries: one carries blood out of your heart and into your body, and the other one carries blood from your body back into your heart. Your blood flows through this circuit again and again: pumping out through the heart and into the body, then back into the heart, and back out to the body. It's like a big circle that it keeps flowing through, and that gives you life! That is how your body's cells are nourished and taken care of.

Your spiritual heart is kind of like your bodily heart in that way: forgiveness and love and mercy are like the blood that flows into your heart, then flows out and then flows back in, again and again, in an ongoing and beautiful cycle that gives your soul true eternal life. God's love and His mercy and forgiveness flow into your heart, and you have to let them also flow out to the world, so that they can just keep circulating in this beautiful way!

But what happens if the circulation stops? If blood stops flowing out of your heart, it also stops flowing into you. If you stop pouring out forgiveness, you'll stop feeling God's forgiveness pour into you! You can't receive forgiveness if you aren't giving out forgiveness.

Think about it this way: if you are really angry and unloving, and then some sweet person tries to hug you or to show you love, you can only really accept the love if you let that anger melt away. You have to let yourself be loving in order to receive love. When you're angry and unloving, your heart is closed off. It's the same way with forgiveness. You can't really receive it unless you have a heart that wants to give it.

This is such an important idea that it is part of the Our Father, the Lord's prayer that Jesus gave us. There's a line about forgiveness that can be translated two ways in English:

“...and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

“...and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

Jesus is teaching us that we will be forgiven our own debts or trespasses or sins, in just the same way we forgive others. If we are stingy with forgiveness, God will not be generous in forgiving us. In order to receive forgiveness, our hearts will have to be open and forgiving too. We will have to always remember that God has forgiven us 10,000 times more than we are asked to forgive others, and do our best to be as forgiving as He is!

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## QUESTIONS:

How many times does Jesus tell Peter he should forgive?

- *Peter was thinking that maybe 7 times would be a good, big number of times to forgive someone. But Jesus tells him to forgive lots and lots of times, like 70 times 7! He wants us to be ready to forgive someone more times than we'll ever actually need to forgive them!*

It is easy for us to imagine how the first servant must have felt when he begged the king to please give him more time to pay his enormous debt. But in the parable, Jesus surprises us by telling us how the king felt. How does the king feel? Is he furious and mean because the servant can't pay him?

- *Jesus says that the king was moved with compassion. He saw how hard this debt was for the servant, and he loved the servant and felt sorry for him, so he did something to help fix it. The king forgives the debt and lets the man go free.*

Maybe we hear this story and get a little mad at the unforgiving servant. How do you feel when you hear that he made the servant who owed him a little money go to jail? We can judge that servant, and say that what he did was wrong. But the point of this parable is not just about that servant, it is about us! What is Jesus trying to help us to learn for our own life?

- *It is frustrating to hear what the unforgiving servant did to the other servant. He had been forgiven so much, and then for him to be so mean to someone who just owed him a little seems unfair. But that is exactly how it is in our life! God forgives us our many, many sins, but we still don't always want to forgive others. Jesus is showing us how ridiculous that is, and how important it is that we forgive. If we don't, what happened to the unforgiving servant at the end of the parable will also happen to us: Jesus said, "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."*

## **FOR DISCUSSION:**

Take a minute to think about forgiveness in your own life. (You don't have to answer these questions out loud: just think about them.) When you do something wrong, do you usually ask forgiveness from the other person? Do you ask God to forgive you?

Now talk together about these questions: Have you ever asked someone to forgive you for something but they would not forgive you? Tell how it feels to be unforgiven. Now think about a time when you felt terrible about something, asked for forgiveness, and you were forgiven. Tell how it feels to be forgiven.

We do things that are unfriendly or even mean, but God loves us anyway. He forgives us for these things. He is forgiving us for ALL of the wrong things we do, so it's like we received forgiveness 10,000 times. Tell how it feels to be forgiven so much by God. Next time someone else asks you for forgiveness, remember this parable. The person is really only asking you to forgive one thing, and God has forgiven you so much! Even if you find it really hard to forgive something that someone has done to you, how can remembering this parable help you?