

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

1. The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:23-35), uses concepts that need clarifying in order to understand the context of the parable. What is the size of the debt of the two servants? What is slavery like during this time?

The 10,000 talents the indebted servant owed to the king were probably silver talents. To put this into perspective, this amount was more than David's 7,000 silver talents offering to build the Temple (1 Chron 29:4). Josephus writes that the annual tribute from Galilee and Perea under Herod was 200 talents. One talent represented 6,000 Roman denarii or 6,000 days' wages for an average worker.

When a debt cannot be repaid, slavery can be considered as a means of compensation (2 Kings 4:1); however, since the price of a slave ranged 500-2,000 denarii, this would have hardly paid down the debt.

"I will repay" was a common recorded promise in ancient business manuscripts, and, in this instance, the magnitude of the debt made this promise impossible to keep. The indebted servant owed 60,000,000 denarii!!

Indebted to the king, the servant could not possibly redeem himself; he was powerless to the consequences of his indebtedness. Yet the king not only forgave the servant, but cancelled the entire debt.

The 100 denarii the fellow servant owed was equivalent to 100 days of work, and was considered then as a small sum. This is a far cry from 60,000,000 denarii debt of the first servant.

2. What do you observe about the attitudes of the various characters? What does the parable say about the jailers?

Both indebted servants fell to their knees and sought mercy ("Be patient with me and I will pay you back"). But the unforgiving servant is unmoved by the plea of mercy and has the fellow servant cast into debtors prison. In the first century, imprisoned debtors could not work to pay off the debt and had to rely on family and friends to provide the funds necessary to repay the debt.

Other servants, who witnessed the inequity, go and tell the king. The Greek verb "diesaphēsan" places a strong emphasis on the verb "tell" as in "explained in detail."

The king is enraged at the unforgiving servant's lack of compassion. For his lack of mercy, the unforgiving servant is judged as "wicked," and the king reinstates the unforgiving servant's debt.

In contrast to their role in debtors prison, the jailers are to torture the unforgiving servant. The servant is to be tortured until he repays his debt, which he can never do.

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3. Did you notice that the parable began with “therefore?” What is this parable comparing the kingdom of heaven to? What is the parable’s message?

Beginning the parable with the term “therefore” causes the reader to examine what took place before the parable, which was Jesus’ instruction on how to treat a sinning brother (Matt 18:15-20) and His response to the question of repeated forgiveness (Matt 18:21-22).

When a fellow Believer sins against another, Jesus prescribed a three step process of restoration of the broken relationship. It was a reminder of the individual responsibility each Believer has towards others, and the confrontation was intended to convict the offender with his sin and win him back.

(1) If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. **(2)** But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. **(3)** If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. (Matt 18:21-22)

When a fellow Believer sins repeatedly, Jesus responded, “.., not seven times, but seventy-seven times,” which was in contrast to the general practice of the first century.

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. (Matt 18:21-22)

Rabbis often taught that one may forgive a brother three times but not on the fourth. Peter’s response of “up to seven times” may have been an attempt at portraying himself as big hearted.

Jesus’ response indicated that there is no limit to forgiveness. While there may still be corporate punishment for the unrepentant offender, Leviticus 19:17 sums up Jesus’ perspective, “You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him.”

The kingdom of heaven establishes certain kinds of personal behavior. Those in the kingdom serve a great God who has forgiven far more than any Christian can ever forgive another. Failing to understand God’s grace excludes one from the kingdom of heaven.

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