

## **The Story – Parable of the Unmerciful Servant**

We are looking at some of the parables of Jesus as part of our series this year. I looked back and I preached from this parable back in 2012 so perhaps after four years it's time we take another look at Jesus parable of the unmerciful servant. Turn with me to **Matthew 18** and let's look at Jesus' story and this important lesson about forgiveness.

Jesus had been teaching the disciples how to respond when someone sins against you or wrongs you. Some of the rabbis taught that three times was enough to show a forgiving spirit. If you keep repeating your offense, perhaps you are not truly repentant. In response to Jesus' teaching, Peter asked how many times Jesus thought you should forgive if your brother sins against you. "Up to seven times?" That's more than twice what the rabbis taught but Jesus' said, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." Some translate is as seventy times seven. Whether he meant 77 times or 490 times, the point was that forgiveness was not to be meticulously measured out. "491 times would be too much!" Forgiveness is not measured out as a quantity, it is extended as part of the nature and character of Christ at work within us. Jesus has forgiven us and we are supposed to forgive others.

Forgiveness is a big deal. Remember Jesus said, **"For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."** **Matthew 6:14-15** C. S. Lewis commented on this passage, "He doesn't say that we are to forgive other people's sins, provided they are not too frightful, or provided there are extenuating circumstances, or anything of that sort. We are to forgive them all, however spiteful, however mean, however often they are repeated. If we don't we shall be forgiven none of our own." Unforgiveness blocks the flow of forgiveness to us and through us. To dramatically drive home the point, Jesus tells the story found in Matthew 18:23-35. (Read the parable).

The lesson for us is that God has graciously forgiven our debt and now we have a responsibility to forgive others as God has forgiven us. If we don't, we will face judgment without our sins forgiven. James 2 says, **"Speak and act as those who are going to be judged...because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful."** **James 2:12-13.** God help us to be merciful and quick to forgive!

Notice the king wants to settle accounts with his servants. It's startling to realize God is keeping an account of everything and the day will come when he will reconcile the account. We

think we are getting by and no one is noticing our sin, our compromise. Every sin is like a debt we owe and sooner or later we will have to settle the account. (It's best to ask Jesus to forgive you and settle the account ahead of time! Don't wait for judgment day!)

I don't know if this guy even knew how indebted he was. I don't think any of us realize the magnitude of our sin until we sense the convicting power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Suddenly we are confronted with the truth. "Wait. I owe how much?"

Jesus used outrageous numbers in this parable. The servant owed ten thousand talents. The average guy was making about one denarii per day and it took 6,000 denarii to equal one talent. One source indicates that 10,000 talents would be worth about 200,000 years worth of wages. How crazy is it then that this servant falls on his knees and begs the master saying, "**Be patient with me and I will pay back everything.**" If he paid for the next 200,000 years he still won't get it paid back. He refuses to admit there was no way he could repay his debt and we are in the same boat. Our sins against God and his word are an impossible debt we can never repay.

The servant needed to face the truth. We need to face the truth. I can hear the servant, along with all of us, trying to make excuses. "Let me explain. I hit a bad stretch and got behind, but I'm going to pay you back. If you can just give me a little time." We want to make excuses. C. S. Lewis said too often we are asking God to "accept our excuse rather than forgive us." We need to admit the truth. We are sinners that owe a debt we can never repay.

What happens next is shocking! The king orders that the servant along with the servant's wife and children and all that he had be sold to pay toward the debt. It's shocking because we need to be shocked. We need to be startled by the horrible cost of sin. This man's sin, his debt, was going to cost him everything! That is the hard truth about sin! It will cost you your life, your future, your family, everything you own! The punishment was extreme because the sin, the debt was extreme. This man needed to realize how serious his crime so he could live forever with gratitude for the enormity of God's mercy that was about to be shown to him!

Imagine listening to the King as he orders everything you hold dear to be taken from you and sold. You can't protest because you know that is just and fair because you are guilty. Suddenly, out of incredible compassion and pity, the king says, "I'm cancelling your debt and letting you go." The bible says, "**The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.**" The spiritual truth is even stronger and more incredible than that. Our king didn't just cancel the debt, he gave his only son to take our place and pay the debt we owed. That

is mercy and grace!

The apostle Paul wrote, **“When you were dead in your sins...God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code with its regulations that was against us and that stood opposed to us, he took it away, nailing it to the cross.” Colossians 2:13-14.** He took the written note that had all our sins, our debt written on it and he tore it up, he cancelled it at the cross. The account of your sins has been settled. Paid in full!

The bible says, **“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast.” Ephesians 2:8.** We can't earn or merit such grace. Our debt was too great. His forgiveness, cancelling the debt of our sins, that is his grace and mercy at work through our faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord. Paul told Titus, **“He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.” Titus 3:5.**

We were about to be sold on the auction block of sin when Jesus stepped in, took our place and canceled our debt. Not because we deserved it, but because of God's great mercy. God stands ready to forgive you of your sins if you will ask him in faith. There is abundant mercy available if you will only turn to him in repentance and faith.

But look at our servant. Somehow he missed the whole point. He asked for more time so he could pay the king back. The king said he had forgiven him and cancelled the debt, but it's like he couldn't hear it, he couldn't believe it. He couldn't receive God's forgiveness and mercy. He thought, like some Christians I know, that mercy and grace were just too good to be true. Perhaps that is what led him to act as he did toward his fellow servant. Look what happens.

The servant went out, found a fellow servant that owed him one hundred denarii (let's say \$100) and began to choke him saying, “Pay back what you owe me!” It sounds unbelievable doesn't it? He had been forgiven so much, yet he refused to forgive this man the tiny debt he owed even though the other servant begged him to be patient. Instead of having him sold in payment of his debt, he had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt, an even more cruel and unmerciful fate. When the other servants saw what happened they went to their master and told what they had seen. When the master heard the story, he called him back in and said, **“You wicked servant. I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you. In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed.”**

This man was turned over to the torturers until he paid back all he owed. It is a powerful picture of those who refuse to forgive others. Failure to forgive results in a tortured life.

But what was going on with this guy? He had been forgiven a massive debt, then refused to forgive and winds up in jail for the rest of his life. What was going on in his heart and mind?

Somewhere between verse 26 and 27, something got lost. It's like the servant flipped things around. "I wouldn't forgive a debt like that if I were king. He'll change his mind so I had better collect the debt owed to me. Besides, if everyone that owed me had repaid me, I wouldn't be in this trouble." So he looks to collect debt rather than share forgiveness and that's when things went wrong. You see, when we fail to accept and receive God's grace and forgiveness, then we will fail to extend forgiveness and grace to others and everything breaks down.

The servant could have created a cycle of forgiveness and mercy and blessing that would have changed everything for himself, his family and his future. He could have shown mercy to that other servant who in turn could have shown mercy to another and it would have brought healing and blessing to everyone. Instead, he failed to accept the master's forgiveness and refused to show forgiveness to others. Rather than being thankful and looking for opportunity to share God's mercy, the unmerciful servant's life motto becomes "Pay back what you owe me!" As a result he loses the very things he hoped to gain and spends the rest of his life tortured by his own bitterness and unforgiveness. The unforgiven become the unforgiving. The ungraced become the ungracious. Let me tell you, the attitude of "You owe me" is a horrible way to live your life.

It's what happens when we fail to realize we are forgiven and we in turn withhold forgiveness from those who have hurt us. Stop living like the wicked, unmerciful servant. Accept the forgiveness Jesus offers and then in turn, go and forgive. Stop blaming everyone else. Release those folks who have hurt and wounded you from their debts. Why? Because your debt has been fully paid. God tore up the note against us at Calvary. Stop trying to tape the pieces back together, still trying to pay your debt, angry, guilty, unforgiving, collecting from others what we think we are owed.

It's time we accept the glorious knowledge that we have been forgiven. Freely we have received and now we can freely give. We poison ourselves by withholding forgiveness. Stop collecting debts and start loving and forgiving the way Christ loves and forgives you!

Is there someone you need to forgive today? How about yourself? Can you accept the

fact that Jesus has forgiven you? What about others? Take this little test and see if there is someone you need to forgive today.

**The resentment test.** Is there someone you resent, you've never let them off the hook? A parent, brother or sister, sweetheart, spouse, friend, co-worker, classmate? Someone who wronged you in childhood, some teacher in school, someone who misused or abused you in the past? If there is resentment in your heart, it's time to realize, you've been forgiven and now it's time for you to forgive. You don't have to keep collecting debts owed to you. Like the servant - you've been forgiven. Freely show that forgiveness to those folks. Release them from your resentment. Forgive. Show them mercy like he has shown to you.

**The responsibility test.** It goes like this: "If only my parents, my spouse, my children, God, if only they had given me what they owed me, I wouldn't be in this mess today. I wouldn't have all these problems." Do you take responsibility for your own faults and failures, or are you saying, "They made me what I am. He did it. She did it. It's their fault"? David Seamands in his book *Healing for Damaged Emotions* says many times extending forgiveness to someone else and assuming responsibility for yourself are two sides of the same coin, and can only be done together. You can't change the past. Stop trying to live there. Stop reliving wounds of the past. Stop blaming circumstances and people in the past. Assume responsibility where appropriate, accept God's forgiveness, then forgive and move on with your life.

**The reminder and reaction test.** Do you find yourself reacting against a person because he/she reminds you of someone else? Maybe you don't like the way your husband disciplines the children because he reminds you of your father who over did it. You don't like you neighbor or you respond to a co-worker with anger or resentment. Why? Because you have never really forgiven someone else and your reaction to a reminder of that unforgiven person from the past triggers resentment. It's time to forgive and release them from your vengeance. Stop trying to collect old debts and accept God's gracious forgiveness.

What do you do with all these debts and hurts from the past? Wrap them up and lay them at the foot of the cross, that place of mercy and forgiveness and grace. Let his forgiveness flood over you and over the wounds and bitter events of your life. Let his forgiveness reach to the wounds inflicted by you and the wounds received by you.

God isn't offering you an extension, more time to try to earn his mercy, more time to try to repay the debt you owe, more time to collect old debts you think are owed to you. He offers

you forgiveness and then by his grace he helps you as you make his forgiveness your own and you in turn show that forgiveness to others.

In his commentary on Matthew, St John Chrysostom points us to the terrible weight of our sins, our indebtedness beyond anything imaginable. Confronted with our sin, holding the letter of indebtedness in our hands, we stand before the master. We are then reminded of his good deeds and the kindness he has repeatedly shown to us. Chrysostom wrote, **“What then are God’s good deeds? He created us from nothing; he made the whole visible world for us, the heaven, the sea, the earth, animals, plants and seeds. I must be brief because of the infinite number of his works. Into us alone of all that are on earth he breathed a living soul. He planted a garden for us. He gave us a helpmate and set us over all the brute species, and he crowned us with glory and honor. And yet after all this, when humanity turned out ungrateful toward its benefactor, he thought us worthy of an even greater gift – forgiveness.”**...St. John Chrysostom What a gift we have been given! Freely you have received of his forgiveness, now freely give. Forgive and be healed and made whole.