

LESSONS FROM HEAVEN FOR LIFE ON EARTH - The Parables - Pt 13
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THE RESPONSIBILITIES THAT COME FROM BEING A FORGIVEN PERSON

Matthew 18:21-35 - "Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" [22] Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven. [23] "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. [24] When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. [25] And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. [26] So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' [27] And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. [28] But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' [29] So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' [30] He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. [31] When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. [32] Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. [33] And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' [34] And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. [35] So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

There are two passages about sin, confession and forgiveness in this eighteenth chapter of Matthew. Jesus gives two teachings, covering two very different situations. Each centers on a different party. The **first** passage deals with a **forced confession** from the unrepentant wrongdoer taken to task before the authorities of the church. The **second** deals with the **free, unforced forgiveness** extended by the wronged Christian.

In **verses 15-20** we have the well known passage dealing with how Christians should respond to the sins of others when those sins are not admitted, repented of, and forsaken. Jesus outlines specific steps designed to encourage the guilty to come to their senses. People are also protected by the presence of witnesses from false accusations and exaggerations. These words are known and quoted by Christians the world over.

Now, Peter has a problem as he listens to Jesus teach about this whole process. These steps, while designed to encourage repentance in the wrongdoer, don't deal with a far more common experience between Christians: ***How many times do I have to freely forgive that irritating person who, while not denying his guilt, hurts me in the same way, perhaps over and over again?***

One gets the impression that Peter would far rather this irritating person would **deny** his guilt so Peter could take the offence to the church to be dealt with firmly and finally. ***But to just forgive a personal injustice over and over again?*** How long does that kind of thing have to go on? Where do my rights not to be a doormat come into play in Christ's kingdom?

Proving guilt in a stubborn, thoughtless wrongdoer before the religious authorities is far more exciting and invigorating and **vindicating** than extending patient, quiet, gracious undeserved forgiveness.

In fact, when you take **both** these passages about sin and forgiveness together, you almost get the impression that Peter is **anxious** to get some issue before the church. And that's what prompts Jesus' further words about simply **forgiving, over and over again**, the one who wrongs you. The judgement of the church, far from being something Christians should rush into, seems to be reserved for very **extreme, public cases where more than just personal injury is at stake.**

In other words, if the teaching of **Matthew 18:21-35** were more thoroughly practiced by tender hearted, forgiving Christians, **Matthew 18:15-20** would rarely be needed. That's why Jesus puts both these teachings back to back.

I think this passage should also be linked with the famous parable of the **Good Samaritan**. The two parables of the Good Samaritan and the parable of the Unmerciful Servant deal, each in turn, with the Christian's **response** to two different situations. The parable of the **Good Samaritan** deals with how the Christian should respond to one who has **been injured by others**. The parable of the **Unmerciful Servant** deals with how the Christian should respond to the one who **does injury to him**. And if I do **both** those things right, I won't go far wrong in my walk with Jesus.

1) **THE FIRST DEBTOR IN JESUS' PARABLE HAD AMASSED AN ENORMOUS DEBT THAT DEMANDED PAYMENT**

Matthew 18:23-26 - "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. [24] When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. [25] And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. [26] So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'"

There are three truths to note in these verses:

- a) ***First, there's the enormity of the accumulated debt this man owed the king.*** The text puts it at ten thousand talents. Scholars quibble over exactly how much debt this translates into in today's terms. No one seems exactly sure, and I don't think the exact amount matters.

Just to put the debt into a better perspective, we **do** know that, even with the lavish description of the gold used in the ***construction of the Tabernacle*** in the wilderness, only ***twenty-nine talents of gold*** were used in the whole project (**Exodus 38:24**). The whole nation of Israel raised that much gold. This one man owed ***ten thousand talents*** to his master.

- b) ***Second, I'm meant to see the unavoidable accountability of this first debtor to the king - "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants"(23).***

The very nature of debt is you have to **pay** it. Otherwise it is a **gift**, not a **debt**. True, this man isn't **anxious** to come and reckon with the king. He was **"brought"** before the king (**24**). He had gone a long time trying to **avoid** such a meeting. The debt grew precisely because he hadn't been **thinking** about this time of assessment. He didn't come willingly. He was finally **forced** to come and settle up.

The Bible says we all face such a time of reckoning - **Romans 14:10-12** - “**Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; [11] for it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.’ [12] So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.**”

- c) ***Third, the debtor’s first response to the king is to state he would personally pay off his total debt - “So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'”***

You have to admire the king for having courtesy enough not to just burst out with gales of laughter. In the history of the universe, has there ever been a more ridiculous promise made? It’s right up there with “Your check is in the mail.”

If there is anything Jesus intends to make hopelessly obvious in this parable it’s this: ***this man has absolutely no hope to pay this debt back.*** If he lived to be a thousand years of age, and gave the king every cent he earned, keeping nothing back for food or lodging, he still couldn’t pay back what he owed.

Yet somehow, instinctively, working off his debt is his ***instant reaction*** to the king. Plainly, it's nonsense. This man ***knows he's in the hole***. What he doesn't understand is ***how to get out***.

Still, I need to be careful with how condemning I am of this debtor's stupidity. You see, I'm really looking at ***myself*** in this first debtor. ***I'm the one who owes the enormous debt to my Creator - my Lord. I'm the one who deserves the debtor's prison. I'm the one who stands before God, accountable for my guilt. And there isn't a prayer in the world of paying back my debt.*** There is absolutely no chance of making things right with my King by my own efforts - religious, moral, or otherwise.

Those are the solutions that will immediately spring to the minds of all decent people when they feel the weight of their sin. Perhaps there are people like that in church today. You sense that you aren't all you should be. You know that you are made different from the horse fly and the ground hog. You know you fail the dictates of your own conscience. You sense God, by His Holy Spirit, dealing with your heart. You stand in the hole of your moral debt.

And immediately, solutions spring to mind. “That’s right! I need to be a kinder, more loving person. I need to quit swearing. I need to be a better father or husband. I really should go to church a bit more.”

And all those solutions echo the words of this first debtor - **“Be patient with me God, I’ll pay you back everything I owe!”**

And Jesus says, **“Don’t be ridiculous. You can’t work your way out of this. What you need isn’t time. What you need is the King’s grace and forgiveness.”**

2) **UNBELIEVABLY, THE KING FORGAVE HIS SLAVE’S ENORMOUS DEBT**

Matthew 18:27 - “And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.”

We are meant to see the wonderful simplicity of those words. The servant never dared to **ask** as largely as he **received**. The king wasn’t thinking about **justice** in dealing with his slave. He granted the slave **far more than he asked**. There was no talk about eventual **repayment**. There was no rebuke for the foolish accumulation of debt. There were no “I told you so’s.”

Without deserving one bit of it, the slave gets off free as a bird - “**And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt**”(27).

Now comes the point of the parable:

3) **THE FORGIVEN SLAVE GOES OUT AND IMMEDIATELY BUMPS INTO A FELLOW SLAVE WHO OWED HIM ONE HUNDRED DENARII**

Matthew 18:28-30 - “**But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' [29] So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' [30] He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.**”

While not insignificant, the debt of one hundred denarii **could** be reasonably payed back in about three months. In other words, unlike the first slave’s debt, this debt **could** realistically be payed back over time. All that was required **was** a little patience. The forgiven slave didn’t even have to **forget about the debt owed him**. All he had to do was wait ninety days. The point? No one **ever** sins against me as greatly as I have sinned against God. Not ever.

Back to the parable. This forgiven debtor won't wait ninety days. He won't wait ninety minutes. I know it sounds unbelievable, but debtor number two gets no **grace**. "Throw him into prison!" And all the angels in heaven gasp in unbelief as these words pour from the forgiven debtor's lips.

Everyone knows there is something terribly wrong here. You don't have to be a preacher or a theologian. Something doesn't **feel** right. Debtor number two cries out to forgiven debtor number one, "**Have patience with me and I will repay you!**" Where had debtor number one heard **those** words before? How short on memory can a person be? You'd think he would have heard his own cry in this second debtor's plea. But his heart is hard as stone.

What's gone wrong here? How did this emancipated debtor fail so badly and so blindly?

- 4) **ONCE HE RECEIVED HIS FORGIVENESS, HE FORGOT ABOUT HIS FORGIVENESS**

This seems to be the whole problem. He just doesn't **live** like a person grateful for his freedom and forgiveness. He doesn't **live** like a person whose life has just been touched with amazing wonder. He doesn't **live** like a person who was once blind but can now see. And it didn't take very long for the bloom to go off the rose. Already, he's lost the joy, and the unbelievable magic, of walking around in forgiven skin. He'd never **say** it out loud. But it's almost like he thinks he **qualified** more for the forgiveness **he** received than debtor number two qualifies for **his** forgiveness.

Maybe I'm meant to see how differently I can live my life depending on my **circumstances**. At the very moment I'm on my face before God, bringing Him my request, my heart can be intent on receiving His blessing and especially His grace. I'm a lean, mean spiritual machine when I want something from God.

Then once I've **received** from God's hand, and I've moved **outside** the church walls, I can treat sinners **just like me**, sinners who **ask of me exactly what I just asked of God**, with strict, nail-them-to-the-wall justice. This forgiven slave seems to be two different people in two different places so very quickly.

Let's pretend the story was initially told a different way. Let's pretend slave number two actually came in, begging slave number one for forgiveness, ***while slave number one was still on his knees, right in front of the king, begging for his own forgiveness.***

I'll bet you slave number one would have forgiven this second slave in a heartbeat. He might have even given him a hug, right in front of the king, and said, "Why of course I'll forgive you. After all, to err is human. To forgive, is divine!"

I have been reawakened to this parable from the words of ***Miroslav Volf*** in his marvelous book ***"Free Of Charge."*** Here's what he says about receiving God's grace: ***"What happens to the flow of grace when it reaches us? Does it then stop, having bestowed the gift and fulfilled its purpose? If the flow were to stop, we would be only receivers, not givers. We would then be unlike what is most divine in God....We are not simply the final destinations in the flow of God's grace. Rather, we find ourselves midstream, so to speak. The gifts flow into us, and they flow on from us....We are simultaneously receivers and givers. We receive from Christ, and we give to and receive from each other."***

Those are probing, profound words. They diagnose the cancer that will surely kill debtor number one. His thinking is totally different. After all, he's already ***received*** his forgiveness. ***Or has he?***

5) **THE STORY OF GRACE HAS A FEARFUL ENDING**

Matthew 18:31-35 - "When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. [32] Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. [33] And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' [34] And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. [35] So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

I think there's a reason Jesus phrased the plea for forgiveness with exactly the same words in each slave. Every time someone needs my forgiveness, I'm ***supposed to see myself, kneeling, all guilty and dirty, before the blazing holiness of God's throne.*** I'm supposed to see ***my own request to God*** in every request ***made of me.*** I'm supposed to ***see my grace extended as being a tiny, pale reflection of the grace I've received.***

And the text clearly says ***God doesn't just extend forgiveness. He supervises forgiveness.*** He watches to see what my ***spiritual memory*** is like. He watches to see if I really ***live in the grace I've received***, or if I'm a spiritual con artist looking for a cheap trip to heaven. Very plainly, this text says ***I put my soul on the line every time I am wronged by a brother and don't extend forgiveness.***

If those closing words of the parable shock us, they really shouldn't. They contain a ***repeated theme*** in the New Testament in general, and in the teaching of Jesus in particular:

Matthew 6:14-15 - "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, [15] but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

This parable only draws out the logical conclusion to those famous words at the end of the Lord's Prayer. If my transgressions aren't forgiven by Father God, then I face inevitable judgement for them.

Matthew 18:34-35 - "And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. [35] So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

Do you want to stay clean and free. Do you want the deliverance received in God's cleansing to grow and empower every part of your life? Then always, constantly, instantly, and as often as needed, forgive your brother. And do it from your heart. It's the best way to keep your soul out of a debtor's prison.