

From the Heart

BY JESSICA DEWITT

It was another normal day, another typical afternoon of dutifully reading a chapter in my Bible. But recently I've been trying to put forth more effort in tackling anything in my readings that stand out to me or bring a question to mind.

When I read Matthew 18:21-35 that day, Jesus' strong language drew my attention, and because this is a parable that serves as a guide (and warning) to us, His followers, I felt called to dig deeper into it.

COME DIG IN WITH ME!

For many of us, the Parable of the Unforgiving Debtor is at least vaguely familiar, but I'll briefly set it up and recount it here: Jesus uses the parable to answer Peter's question of how many times to forgive a brother. Peter suggests seven times, no doubt thinking this a good amount, but Jesus multiplies it many times over. Not seven times, He says, but "seventy-seven times," or even "seventy times seven" (depending on the Bible translation).

As an explanation for this answer, Jesus then tells the story of a servant owing the king ten thousand talents (billions of dollars), but upon asking for mercy, is saved from a jail sentence or slavery, receiving instead a complete pardon.

Next, the servant attempts to collect a very small debt - only a hundred denarii, or a few dollars - owed to him by a fellow worker. When this second servant asks the protagonist for mercy, it is denied him and he is put in prison. The king, or master, finds out and is understandably very angry. "Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" the master tells him, and then turns the servant "over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed" (verses 33-34, all scripture references quoted from the New International Version). Jesus ends the parable in verse 35 with this bold statement: "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."



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Jesus' words are forceful, demanding that we pay attention and weigh the lesson he sets before all His disciples, both the disciples of that time as well as us, His disciples today. So let's break the story down to better grasp its full meaning. Clearly, the king/master is God, that's easy enough to determine. And the servant? Well, the servant buried in debt of billions of dollars is very much us, at least in the beginning of the tale. We too are buried in debt, and like that servant, we can't redeem ourselves. Our debt, though, is not a monetary one; in this story, the debt represents our sin.

Sin is the indelible ink that stains our very beings from the start; we are tainted and sullied by that inherited fallen nature. We further pollute ourselves by both what we do and by what we leave undone in our thoughts and actions. Paul groans with us in this dilemma we are trapped in: "For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do...What a wretched man I am!" (Romans 7:14, 24).

We are powerless to overcome this debt, this sin, that condemns us and taints every part of ourselves and our lives. Both the servant's debt and ours are insurmountable. And unfortunately for the servant in the parable, this massive debt has come due, and the master requires it be paid.

A bleak picture, isn't it? It's a hopeless situation, and we shouldn't let that fact escape us. But what comes next is something that changes everything - a huge, unexpected twist in the storyline occurs.



BUT, GRACE

With no other option before him, the servant does the only thing left for him to do: he begs for mercy. And, shockingly enough, despite the vast amount owed, the king takes pity on him and cancels the debt, leaving the servant a free man.

Could there be a clearer picture of our own story than that? Like the servant, it is when we humbly ask the Lord for mercy that we receive the forgiveness of our debts, the sins that bind us in shackles. When we do this simple thing, God gives us perfect grace through Jesus, our impossible debt is canceled, and we are set free. It's the Good News, it's captives being released, it's eternal life being found! It's God's mercy and grace, His kindness and goodness, all extended to us, enveloping us.

He saves us - and this is not at all of ourselves.

Have you felt the crushing weight of such debt, the sin and mistakes and wrongs that you can't remedy or remove?

Instead of light, there is darkness.

Instead of peace, there is an insatiable hunger and a thirst that never abates. Know that there is good news.

YET, THERE IS HOPE!

Turn it all over to Jesus, asking Him to pardon you and release you from that debt. Endless mercy and grace can only be found in Him as your Savior and Lord, and it's freely available to all who ask.

He waits for you.

Freedom and abounding love wait for you.

All you must do is ask Him for mercy and you shall receive it.



For those of us redeemed by Jesus and walking in freedom and faith, do we remember what He has done for us?

Do we remember where we came from, who we once were, and how He saved and changed us?

He has called us out of darkness and death and destruction, and brought us into His eternal wonderful light! It is marvelous, and **it must shake us to our core; it must shape who we are and all that we do.** Because if it doesn't, we may end up like the servant in the latter part of the parable, and what a tragic thing that would be.

We have now seen in the story how the servant has been generously freed by his master - what a shocking thing the king has done! We would expect that gratitude in the servant would abound; surely the grace he received changed him.

But it doesn't.

Instead, we see him being harsh with his fellow servant, demanding to be repaid a miniscule amount of money, and seeking punishment for his cohort when the amount isn't returned immediately.

He received such incredible mercy for himself, yet refuses to offer it to another. His heart remains hardened, nor does his selfish attitude change - and the master sees this and is appalled. Clearly, the king expected the servant to be altered by his great intercession in that servant's life. And the servant is punished as a result of his failure to give that which he himself received. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart," Jesus warns (Matt. 18:35).

This begs the question then: Are we like that servant? We have been forgiven for everything, we have been made holy, we have been promised eternity with the Father - how are our hearts?

It isn't enough to accept what God has done for us and leave it at that, Jesus makes that painfully clear.



Have we allowed that incredible mercy we've received to transform us? Are we still petty, self-seeking people or are we humble, grace-givers?

God doesn't mean for grace to stop with us, but rather to flow through us to others. So here's the hard part, the "this is where the rubber meets the road" part: **Is there someone in your life who needs your forgiveness, but you are reluctant to give it?**

If so, remember what He has done for you, and the life He calls you to - don't restrain the mercy He tells us to share. Remember too that He isn't asking you to do anything by yourself. His Spirit resides in you, giving you His power to do it.

HOW, THEN, DO WE FORGIVE?

Ask for His help, take the step to forgive, and surrender it to Him - over and over again, as needed. And then, do the unthinkable: pray for the one who wronged you.

It's a hard thing, and it goes against what we would choose to do. But our Lord is faithful, He is more than willing and able to uphold you in doing His will. And forgiving the one who wrongs you is definitely His will for you.

Peter wanted to know the number of times to forgive another when they wrong us, a simple enough question. Jesus takes this basic question and uses it to explain a big truth: that much is given to His followers, and much is required of them. Forgiveness, Jesus explains in the passage, is to be unmerited and unlimited. And how we forgive those who trespass against us is just as important as how many times - it must be "from [the] heart."

Will God condemn us if we fail to forgive, just as the master condemned the unmerciful servant? If Jesus is our Savior then no, absolutely not. As Matthew Henry explains,

"We are not to suppose that God actually forgives men, and afterwards reckons their guilt to them to condemn them...[the servant's] after-conduct shows that [he] never entered into the spirit, or experienced the sanctifying grace of the gospel."



But our Lord is giving us clear directions to follow in this parable, and there are sure to be consequences if we disobey. So let's not be like that foolish servant who, though he accepts great compassion, has a heart that remains unaffected and cold towards his co-worker.

HEART CHECK

Now is the perfect time to check on the status of our own hearts. Have they been changed by grace, filled with kindness and compassion for our fellow men, and remaining pliant to God's directions? Or are they hardened to others and self-focused, unyielding to God's will? Are we living out that grace given to us and, as Henry puts it, "enter[ing] into the spirit," or are we hindering the Spirit's work in us?

If it's the latter, we need to take Jesus' warning seriously in Matthew 18 and remember what God has done for us, repenting of our pridefulness and asking for Him to renew our hearts once again. His mercy to us should shape our actions towards others, for when we forgive them, we testify to that which we ourselves have received. Furthermore, because boundless mercy, forgiveness, and grace are entirely unnatural, they are proof of His work and His power in us.

It makes us different and it makes others see that maybe our God truly is real and our faith really might be legitimate. So in this, even when it's challenging to do, let's obey Him. Let's forgive others, counting on His help to do so. Let's be merciful in small and large things alike. And let's live graciously, as those who remember vividly His inestimable grace given first to us.

Reflections

