

The Unmerciful Servant

Grace and Forgiveness · Parables of Jesus

When Peter asked Jesus, 'Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?' (Matthew 18:21)—thinking himself generous by exceeding the rabbinic standard of three times—Christ answered, 'I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven' (Matthew 18:22), indicating limitless forgiveness. He then illustrated this principle with a parable demonstrating that those forgiven an infinite debt by God must extend forgiveness to others, regardless of the offense's magnitude.

A certain king began reckoning with his servants and found one who owed him ten thousand talents—an incomprehensibly vast sum, equivalent to millions of denarii (perhaps 60 million days' wages for a common laborer). No individual could accumulate such a debt through ordinary means; the figure represents the impossible burden of sin's debt before God.

Note: One talent equaled approximately 6,000 denarii; ten thousand talents thus represented about 60 million days' wages. By comparison, the annual tax revenue of Galilee and Perea combined was only 200 talents. The debt was mathematically unpayable, symbolizing humanity's absolute insolvency before divine justice. The subsequent debt of 100 pence (denarii) was roughly 100 days' wages—substantial but manageable. The ratio between the two debts exceeds 600,000 to 1.

The servant, unable to pay, faced the legal consequence: he, his wife, his children, and all his possessions would be sold. Falling down, he worshiped the king, pleading, 'Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all'—a promise he could never fulfill. Moved with compassion, the lord released him and forgave the entire debt.

But that same servant, immediately after receiving this extraordinary pardon, encountered a fellow servant who owed him a hundred pence—roughly 100

days' wages, less than one six-hundred-thousandth of what he'd been forgiven. He took him by the throat, demanding, 'Pay me that thou owest.' The fellow servant fell down at his feet, using the identical plea—'Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all'—that had moved the king to mercy. Yet the forgiven servant 'would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt.' The other servants, witnessing this cruelty, were grieved and reported everything to their lord.

The king summoned the unmerciful servant: 'O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee?' In his wrath, the lord delivered him to the tormentors until he should pay all that was due—which, given the debt's magnitude, meant perpetual imprisonment. Christ concluded with a sobering warning: 'So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses' (Matthew 18:35). The parable reveals that genuine reception of divine forgiveness inevitably produces a forgiving spirit toward others. Those who withhold mercy after receiving it demonstrate they never truly embraced God's grace, and face judgment proportionate to their hardness of heart.

Key Verses

Matthew 18:23-25

Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents. But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made.

Matthew 18:26-27

The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt.

Matthew 18:28-30

But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellowservants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest. And his fellowservant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt.

Matthew 18:32-34

Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him.

Matthew 18:35

So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.

Ephesians 4:32

And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.