



“All Is Forgiven—Love, Papa”

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver

coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.'

But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, '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 handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."—Matthew 18:21-35

In his story, "The Capital of the World," Ernest Hemingway wrote about a Spanish father who wanted to be reconciled with his son. His son had run away to the lights and attractions of the big city of Madrid. The father put an advertisement in the newspaper: "Paco, meet me at the Hotel Montana at noon on Tuesday. All is forgiven! Love, Papa."

Paco is a common name in Spain—so much so that when the father went to the Hotel Montana on Tuesday at noon, there were 800 young men named Paco waiting for their fathers!

We all desperately crave forgiveness! Our hunger for forgiveness and reconciliation is one of the most basic of all human desires and yearnings. But while we desperately seek forgiveness for ourselves,

we often seem reluctant to see others receive it. While we long to be forgiven, we find forgiving those who, as so many country-and-western or blues songs express, “done us wrong,” to be extremely difficult. There are so many songs about people doing each other wrong that some years ago one popular song was called “Another Somebody Done Somebody Wrong Song.”

The fact that we all crave forgiveness is one of the reasons why the gospel is such incredibly good news! Can you imagine the gospel of Jesus Christ without forgiveness? Can you imagine experiencing God’s grace without being forgiven? Forgiveness lies at the heart of our relationship with God. There is no reconciliation without forgiveness.

This parable of Jesus is often referred to as the parable of the unforgiving servant. It’s a parable about someone who had been forgiven much yet ironically finds himself unwilling to forgive someone who owes him a comparatively small sum. This is a parable of unimaginable forgiveness—forgiveness that defies human logic—forgiveness that seems, to the human mind, apart from God’s grace, like a fairy tale.

The parable of the unforgiving servant follows a conversation between Peter and Jesus and the answer Jesus gives to Peter’s question. Peter wants to know how many times he is required to forgive—is there a limit when he can stop forgiving? Peter suggests seven would be a good number to use as a limitation on forgiveness. After all, what if someone takes advantage of the opportunity to be forgiven—and keeps misbehaving, continually requesting forgiveness? Surely Jesus isn’t saying that we should just keep on forgiving, no matter what?

Jesus responds with a deliberate hyperbolic exaggeration. He tells Peter that he should forgive seventy times seven times. Jesus is saying, of course, that there is no end to forgiveness. The forgiveness God gives has no boundaries. Jesus is saying that divine forgiveness is not an exercise in book-keeping. The forgiveness that comes from God does not depend on accurate record keeping. Paul says a similar thing when he writes about the love of God, in 1 Corinthians 13:5:

“It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.”

Forgiveness Without Limits

After Jesus says God’s forgiveness has no limits, then he begins the parable of the unforgiving servant. Jesus begins this parable with the same introduction he uses for a number of other parables, by saying: *“the kingdom of heaven is like...”* The kingdom of heaven is like this story—the kingdom of heaven is filled with forgiveness, it is a kingdom of mercy and grace.

Jesus begins the parable with law. In what is perhaps his most detailed parable about forgiveness, Jesus describes a debtor who owes ten thousand bags of gold being brought to his king. The king is a spiritual accountant—a spiritual bean counter. For that reason alone, regardless of the mercy this king later gives, we should hesitate before deciding that Jesus is casting God the Father in the role of this king. While we might understand some of the actions of the king of this parable as God-like, this character is not a perfect reflection of our heavenly Father. Our loving heavenly Father does not keep a record of our debts. The love of God *“...keeps no record of wrongs”* (1 Corinthians 13:5).

As the story begins, the debtor, who owes ten thousand bags of gold (earlier translations defined the debt as being ten thousand talents), is brought before the king, who wants to settle accounts. It's difficult to translate a generic reference to 10,000 bags of gold or talents into today's currency. Interpretations differ about how much this amount actually is.

One writer suggested that the average working man in the first-century would have needed to work for twenty years to earn one talent. If that estimate is accurate, we're talking about this man's debt being roughly equivalent to 200,000 years of work. Considering that most people are able to work about 40 years in their lifetime today, the debt owed by the debtor was equal to the total earnings of 5,000 lifetimes!

The point of the parable, of course, is not the exact amount that he owed. The most recent, 2011 revision of the New International Version recognizes this issue, and uses the far less precise “bags of gold” rather than talents (for more about bags of gold versus talents please see Chapter Six). By a hyperbolic exaggeration Jesus has already stipulated that a precise number of times we must forgive someone is not the issue. By the same token, Jesus is not giving us the exact amount this debtor owed. He is instead illustrating the stupendous debt of spiritual bankruptcy that this man (and any human for that matter) owes. No one could ever, in 5,000 lifetimes, repay this debt!

By the way, this debtor is someone who had been given some degree of responsibility. After all, not everyone would have the capabilities necessary to run up this kind of incredible debt! When

the debtor is faced with the staggering consequences of his debt—he cannot repay his debt and he and his wife and his family will all become slaves to help pay off that debt—he throws himself on the mercy of the king.

But a truly amazing thing happens! The king forgives the debt! All the debtor has to do to receive

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grace is to recognize his inability to repay his debt and request forgiveness from the king!

Even more amazing, even though the debtor doesn't seem to realize it, is that full and complete forgiveness is given without any strings attached. There are no preconditions. There is no contract to sign. There is no collateral the debtor must provide, nor any down payment (earnest money) he must pay up front as an evidence of his intent. There is no schedule of repayments—no obligation to repay a certain number of talents each month.

The king cancels the debt for no obvious reason. The king cancels the debt because he can, and of course in this regard we might say that he is like our loving God who unconditionally forgives us. God forgives for no humanly perceived apparent reason! God's forgiveness is given to those who have proven themselves virtually useless—completely unable to keep their own spiritual houses in order!

But the debtor who had failed so miserably (like all human beings) just can't believe the king's unconditional grace (failure to believe the riches of God's grace is another all-too-human trait!). The king doesn't stipulate repayment, but the debtor decides he needs to salvage some self-respect and attempt some token repayment. Driven by the desire to save face, the debtor certainly can't see any direct correlation to the lavish, unheard of forgiveness he has just received to the forgiveness he can, in turn, pass on to others. In order to repay the king, the recently forgiven servant, having been forgiven a debt that it would take him 5,000 lifetimes to repay, turns around and refuses to forgive someone who owed him the equivalent of \$50.

The forgiven debtor is still operating out of his old religious paradigm. In spite of the grace lavished on him, he is still working on the basis of his own self-salvation program. He is like the prodigal son who planned to be a slave for his father so that he could recoup the inheritance he squandered. Grace was too absurd to consider.

The forgiven debtor failed to respond to someone who begged him to forgive them, someone who used *the exact same words* he himself used when he begged the king for his own forgiveness. He failed to feel pity because he was so absorbed in trying to find a way to repay his own debt! Jesus sets up this scene so that we, his listeners and readers, would naturally be appalled and wonder why the callous, insensitive much-forgiven man would not forgive someone who owed him a comparatively insignificant amount.

This unforgiving forgiven debtor is you and me—and all humanity! We are programmed to default

to living by law—by numbers, calculations and amounts—by counting the sins of everyone who owes us. Unless we unreservedly embrace the grace which God gives us, we are incapable of passing it on to others. Unless we fully embrace the grace of God, we wind up biting the hand of the One who spiritually feeds us! Until we fully embrace God's grace, we will never fully realize the extravagant, unheard of, beyond belief grace we have been given.

Forgiven Yet Unforgiving!

The forgiven servant who was himself unforgiving is every man and every woman—in the sense that 1) we love to experience grace ourselves, but we are loathe to pass it on to others—in fact we often begrudge grace when others receive it, and 2) God's grace just seems to be too good to be true—so much so that even when he lavishes his grace on us our attention and focus almost always reverts back to legalistic record keeping.

Similar scenes happen all the time when God's amazing, staggering, radical grace is preached. Even though God's grace is the very heart and core of the gospel of Jesus Christ, when the real implications of God's grace are explained, objections resound throughout the world of Christendom.

When a pastor preaches about grace, many in the congregation, especially the board of deacons and others in positions of authority, insist on a series of sermons the next few weeks to “balance out” the sermon about grace. “After all,” so goes the thinking, “if we just preach grace and leave it at that, people might get the wrong idea. If we just leave them with this ‘grace thing’ how in the world can we control them?”

So after a grace sermon or two is given the call goes out for sermons about laws, obedience, accountability, standards, requirements of church membership, about the obligation to attend church every Sunday and of course about the necessity to pay a ten-percent tithe, no matter what. Immediately following any discussion of grace many people demand sermons about judgment and eternal torture in hell—these sermons, it would seem, are directed toward those who might be tempted to go overboard and take God’s love, grace and forgiveness far more seriously than they “should.”

Here are some actual statements made in sermons or in written form by those who claim their teaching is based on the teachings of Jesus Christ:

- Your forgiveness is guaranteed *as long as* you forgive others.
- You must forgive *if* you expect to be forgiven.
- God will not forgive you *unless and until* you forgive others.

God’s limitless, unconditional forgiveness, given by his grace, based on his love, scares people. God’s amazing forgiveness rocks religious boats—it disturbs the religious status quo—it upsets religious apple carts—it turns the values of Christ-less religion upside down. Christ-less religion is deathly afraid of losing control, and so are we, for that matter. If we accept God’s grace, then we know that we are in his good graces. But wait!

While we like the idea of being in God’s good graces, we don’t like the process of getting there—for God insists that we can only arrive in his good graces as a consequence of his free gift.

There’s the rub! We humans do not like the humility involved in accepting handouts.

When God offers us his grace, without cost and without strings, it frightens us. We don't want to accept his free handouts—so we, like the servant who owed 5,000 lifetimes of work, often prefer to revert to religious record keeping. We reject grace because we actually prefer to count our own sins and the sins of others, even though God refuses to do so. This is the judgment that Jesus says we bring on ourselves.

The parable concludes with the master (the king) handing over the man who had been forgiven much, yet who refused to forgive a small amount, to jailors who would torture him.

Upon reading this last part of the parable many who are themselves confused (like the unforgiving servant was) by God's lavish grace, say, "You see what happens? God will send us to hell if we don't do all the right things—don't give me this grace stuff!"

This same chapter of Matthew 18 records the parable of the lost sheep. This parable concludes: "*In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish*" (Matthew 18:14).

Are we to assume that Jesus, who is "*...the same yesterday, today and forever*" (Hebrews 13:8) is telling us that the Father who, in Matthew 18:14, was not willing that any should perish, is depicted, 18 verses later (vs. 32) as torturing the hell out of those who are unmerciful? Is God threatening to torture us unless we are merciful?

God is not willing that anyone should perish. God is not willing that anyone be lost in hopeless debt that he can never repay. God is not willing to leave anyone in the horrible delusion that he can

bail himself out of a bottomless pit. God is not willing to lose anyone, even those who are so enslaved by performance-based religion that they cannot recognize the pleas for mercy they hear from others as being the exact same pleas they themselves utter before the King.

Is God planning to torture us for being unmerciful? No, the parable simply says that the master (whether or not Jesus is casting God the Father in this role is not absolutely clear) allows us to choose our own destiny. In this parable, the master doesn't send anyone to hell. Neither does God.

Jesus ends this parable by saying there are those who refuse to accept grace and forgiveness—and by doing so, they insist on living in a dog-eat-dog religious world where each and every sin must be paid for. Those who resist divine forgiveness will insist on Christ-less religion, living their lives enslaved by spiritual accountants and bean-counters. They have a choice.

The master in the parable reluctantly accepts the decision of those who insist on remaining lost in a graceless world. He simply states the obvious—those who cut themselves off from the grace that is offered to them will live with the religious nightmare they choose, the spiritual torture they will endure in a graceless world. Living in a state of unforgiveness is torture. If we choose to live in religious bondage, we choose the consequences of seemingly endless, unforgiving shame and guilt. God doesn't impose this state—we choose it!

Jesus ends this parable by saying if we live by the sword of legalism, if we refuse to experience the rest and peace that God offers, then we choose to die by the sword of legalism. God does not active-

ly mete out punishment, he does not fuel the cycle of legalism, but he does not stand in the way of those who insist on remaining within the prison cells of Christ-less religion.

The king in this story, who is not one and the same as our loving heavenly Father in every way (as I mentioned earlier), simply allows the servant who was forgiven an incredible debt, and in turn refused to forgive a debt of \$50, to live in bondage to Christ-less religion. You may have heard the maxim or proverb: “I do not have the right to deny you the consequences of your actions.”

Parents learn this lesson as their children mature and grow. Regardless of what we as parents do or do not do, children will eventually make their own choices. There are times when we as parents are delighted with our mature children’s choices, and there are times when we are bewildered and even appalled. But as our children grow and mature and assume their place in society, we come to realize that we cannot deny them the consequences of their choices.

In some respects, while the king in this story is not identical to God, and while earthly parents are not identical with our heavenly Father, our Father God takes a similar perspective regarding our choices. God does not force his grace and forgiveness on anyone. Divine forgiveness is available to all, without cost—but we are not compelled to receive it. The decision about accepting his forgiveness is ours.

If we accept his forgiveness we will, by definition, pass that forgiveness on to others. We will pass it on to others because the act of accepting his forgiveness means accepting the risen life of Jesus,

so that *“I no longer live, but Christ lives in me”* (Galatians 2:20). When Jesus lives within us, he will, sooner or later, in his time and his way, produce an attitude of forgiveness for others.

Those who fail to forgive themselves or others are actually saying that their standard of forgiveness is higher than that of God’s, for they fail to realize or accept that God has already forgiven their own sins and those who have sinned against them.

Really letting go of what we believe we deserve and what we believe others owe us is hard to do. In fact, it’s impossible apart from God’s grace. We cannot fully receive God’s grace unless and until we reject self-salvation schemes, religious self-justification programs and merciless spiritual scorekeeping (of our performance as well as that of others). His forgiveness creates forgiveness in us. The message of the gospel is truly amazing. It’s summed up in a message to you and me from our heavenly Father: “All is forgiven—Love, Papa.”

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