

## Text: Mt 18.23-35

We are getting a variety of questions in our “Ask the Pastor” series. I appreciate all of them. Next week I am planning to tackle a question about fasting. That one might take more than one message.

This week, the question is about the parable of the unforgiving servant found in Matthew 18. This passage is one that is unique to Matthew.

The question has to do with the King’s response to the unforgiving servant, after the servant refuses to forgive another servant. Let’s read the passage, then outline the question:

Read Mt 18.23-35

Let’s do a quick summary:

**First**, the King forgives the servant of a massive debt

**Second**, the servant finds another servant and refuses to forgive the second servant’s much smaller debt.

**Then** the King hears about it, hauls the first servant in, upbraids him for his lack of mercy, and casts him into prison until he should repay all.

That brings up this question: “Why does the king go back on the forgiveness?”

And, even more troubling, what does that mean for us, if God is the king, and we don’t forgive?

The answers lie in context primarily and in the laws of interpreting parables secondarily.

First, we’ll get into a more detailed look at the parable, survey the alternatives, and then offer conclusions.

### I. The key details of the parable

#### A. The parable is a parable of the Kingdom (23)

1. Basic definition: the rule of God in history, at present, and in the future
2. A parable that begins “the kingdom is like” is meant to teach one aspect of the kingdom

## B. The debts of the two servants

### 1. First servant: ten thousand talents

- a. An immense sum: one talent about 75 lb, used for measuring gold or silver
- b. The point is that the debt was impossible to pay – 75,000 lb of gold? Or even of silver?
  - 1) One site quoted over \$1600 per ounce for gold today
  - 2) Silver is merely \$18.50 per ounce today (a bargain)
  - 3) 10,000 talents equals about 12,000,000 ounces – even if it's just the price of silver, that's \$222,000,000 – gold is 86 times that!

### 2. Second servant: 100 denarii – roughly 1/3 of a working man's wage in a year

The debt is large, but manageable

## C. The desperate plight of these debtors

### 1. The king means to sell the man, his family, and all his possessions

“Selling people into slavery to pay their debts was extremely common in the ancient world.”<sup>1</sup>

- a. As slaves, these people will not satisfy the debt
  - b. The man is apparently a high-ranking civil servant who may have much material wealth
  - c. Nevertheless, the king will lose on the proposition
  - d. On his plea, he forgives him [this would astonish Jesus' audience]
- ### 2. The forgiven servant likewise intends to exact payment out of the second servant
- a. The small debt could be satisfied if he simply sold the second servant as a slave

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary 22 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 283.

b. His heart is harder than the kings: he doesn't just want to cut his losses, he wants a form of vengeance

D. There is a difference between the final treatment of the first servant from the king's original intention (34)

1. No longer is the king selling the man's family or possessions (see v. 25)
2. Now he is imprisoned under torture until he should repay (*i.e.*, jailed forever — no way to repay)

"Torments were inflicted on *criminals*, not on debtors."<sup>2</sup>

I think that will give a hint at the solution, but let's consider how commentators have handled the parable.

## II. The alternative interpretations

"The idea of God delivering His slaves, the disciples, over to the torturers has disturbed many readers of this parable."<sup>3</sup>

A. Some conclude that this teaches one can lose his salvation

"This makes salvation dependent on good works rather than belief in Jesus."<sup>4</sup>

B. Others say it is meant as a warning to the disciples about their own behaviour

1. The exact situation is highly unlikely for anyone
2. The warning would lose its force if this were the case

C. Still others say that if someone would behave in this way, he was never a believer

1. Example, Judas Iscariot
2. Even so many genuine believers struggle with unforgiveness

<sup>2</sup> Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament: Matthew & Mark*, ed. Robert Frew (London: Blackie & Son, 1884), 190.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 18.35.

<sup>4</sup> Constable, Mt 18.35.

- D. Some want to make it apply to discipline in this present life rather than eternal torment
- E. Or others, unforgiveness means loss of eternal reward
- F. Or, finally, Jesus is using hyperbole (literary exaggeration) to make a forceful point

This last is close to the right idea, I think, but we haven't gotten to the key interpretative points.

### III. The lesson is cultivating a forgiving spirit

#### A. Key interpretative points

1. "For this reason..." [KJV "therefore"]
2. Verse 35:

Mt 18.35 "My heavenly Father will also do the same **to you**, if each of you does not forgive **his brother** from your heart."

#### B. These two points connect the passage to the context

1. Go to verse 15: "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private..."

The whole passage is about relations with a brother

2. Go to verse 21: 'Then Peter came and said to Him, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?''
  - a. Ok, says Peter, I get it that I am to try to work things out with my brother... but...
  - b. How often? How long is this going to go on?
3. Go to v. 22: Not seven times, but seventy times seven (*i.e.*, don't stop forgiving)

C. The point is this: the unforgiving servant was punished for the crime of unforgiveness, not for the debt he owed

Just as he was punished, so, too, will you be punished if you won't forgive.

1. Consider the depression, anxiety, acting out, etc., that flows out of a life that hangs on to bitterness (really, unforgiveness)
2. Consider the freedom that comes when you give it up and refuse to remember the sins of your brother

### Conclusion:

"The world's worst prison is the prison of an unforgiving heart. If we refuse to forgive others, then we are only imprisoning ourselves and causing our own torment. Some of the most miserable people I have met in my ministry have been people who would not forgive others. They lived only to imagine ways to punish these people who had wronged them. But they were really only punishing themselves."<sup>5</sup>

Ep 4.32 Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

Col 3.13 bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.

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<sup>5</sup> Warren W Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1996), 67.