

Forgive as Forgiven

Matthew 18:23-35

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The parable of the unforgiving servant, is Jesus's response to Peter's question: How often should I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Seven times Lord? Jesus answers no, seventy seven times. In other words, Jesus commands us: never stop forgiving your brother or sister who sins against you. Notice that Jesus doesn't say, forgive your brother only when he asks for forgiveness, or only forgive your brother if it is a little offense, or only if it is by accident. No, Jesus doesn't put conditions on the mercy and forgiveness of the Kingdom of God, the kingdom in which all of us are fellow servants. Mercy in the Kingdom of God is forgiveness from the heart and without conditions and without limits. Jesus says at the beginning of today's parable that the Kingdom of God can be compared to or is like a human kingdom that he then describes. A human kingdom has a king and many servants, and an economy through which servants owe tribute to the king while servants may owe debts to one another.

First, the wicked servant owes the king an unimaginable amount of debt, 10,000 talents. A talent was a huge amount of money, take your yearly salary and multiply it by twenty, that is a talent. Then multiply your twenty yearly salaries by 10,000. The debt is beyond the possibility of repayment. The king knows this and even if he sold the servant and his wife and children and took all that he had and threw him in prison and then somehow collected the debt, it would take a thousand lifetimes to pay it back. The master knows his servant, the king

knows what kind of character he's dealing with, the king knows that the wicked servant is ungrateful and selfish.

And then, the wicked servant begs, prostrating himself on the ground, crying out for the king to take pity on him. The wicked servant says he'll pay back the king's debt. But all the fellow servants in the king's court know, and all of us know, that there is no way that guy could ever pay back that debt. The king is no fool of course, he knows that the debt is impossible to pay back, but he forgives the debt of the wicked servant anyway. The king shows himself as merciful without judgment. Justice demands that the wicked servant pay the king what is owed to him. But right now, the king doesn't demand justice from this poor and wicked servant. He forgives the debt without condition.

This reminds me of the literal translation of the Our Father, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, though we know the prayer better as forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. We owe the king an unimaginable debt, but because the king is good his response is mercy. Jesus tells us to be merciful as your heavenly father is merciful. The wicked servant has been shown mercy, without judgment or justice. So to be a faithful servant of his king, the servant needs to show mercy also.

But, of course, as we know, the wicked servant is cruel, and he comes across a fellow servant who owes him money. It's not an unimaginable amount of money, like the 200,000 years' salary that the king just forgave him, instead it's only a hundred denarii, its like a couple hundred dollars. Compared to what wicked servant owed the king, it's a drop of water in the ocean. You or me, I would hope, would come across this fellow servant and say, hey, my friend, I could really use that

200 dollars, maybe you could get it to me in a couple weeks or maybe you could just pay me like 20 dollars a day until we're all square. Or maybe we would let it go with joy, remembering the great debt we were just forgiven. Instead, this wicked servant grabs the man by the throat nearly choking him and demands that he pay his debt.

Well, the poor fellow servant falls on the ground and begs for pity and mercy, just as the wicked servant did moments before. He begs the wicked servant to have patience with him, he will pay back the debt. This time, it's realistic, he could pay back the debt. But, the wicked servant refuses to be patient and throws the man into prison, in other words he withholds compassion and pity, mercy and forgiveness, he holds a grudge and demands justice. In response to a small debt, the wicked servant is cruel and shows no mercy.

Now, if we watched this happen in our Church community, or if we were to see this happen in our families, or in our city, we'd be troubled by it, it might make our stomach turn at the cruelty of the wicked servant. And so, understandably, the other servants approach the king, and beg the king to make right the situation. And so the king does. The Gospel says that the king delivered the wicked servant over to the jailors, to torturers, until the original debt was paid, the king serves justice to the unforgiving servant. The wicked servant isn't delivered to prison because of his debt, but because he refuses to forgive the debts of his fellow servants. The king says "shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant the way I had mercy on you?" So, we who have seen the true light, we whose sins are washed away and transgressions wiped out, let us forgive those who trespass against us, but without condition and without limit. Amen.