

PARABLE OF THE UNFORGIVING DEBTOR

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SCRIPTURE: Matthew 18:23-25

Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, who would take account of his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him who owed him ten thousand talents. But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his Lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and his children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. And the servant besought 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. The servant, therefore, fell down and worshipped him. But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellow-servants 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 fellow servant 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. So when his fellow-servants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their Lord all that was done. 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; should not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow servant, 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. So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your heart forgive not every one his brother their trespasses

Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

The parable of the unforgiving debtor is another of the parables which opens with "The kingdom of heaven is likened unto..." It is a parable of the kingdom, having to do with those who seek and find entrance to the kingdom. It is a parable teaching the ways of the kingdom, where God's will is done on earth as it is done in heaven.

The parable opens with a king who decided that it was time to take account of his servants, or to make a reckoning of how they stood with him. This word "servants" always carries with it in Greek the idea of "slaves" rather than paid or hired servants. One of the first servants to appear before the King was found to owe him ten thousand talents. The Greek text later implies that this money was a loan. The servant was not simply a tax collector who was behind in his accounts. He was a debtor who had borrowed money, and the king was now demanding an accounting of his loan.

How much was this debt? The King James translation says "ten thousand talents." The Revised Standard translation says in a footnote that a talent was \$1,000, which would make the debt ten million dollars. Dummelow in his commentary says that if the Attic silver talent is used, equivalent to 240 English Pounds, the debt would be approximately two and a half million dollars. But if the Hebrew silver talent is used, which is the equivalent to 410 English pounds, the total amount would be over twenty million dollars; or if talents of gold are intended, the amount would be well over thirty million. The important thing is not to know exactly how much this debt amounted to in modern money, but to realize that it represented an utterly and hopelessly impossible amount which never could be repaid by one man.

In contrast to this amount, let us notice at this point the smaller debt which was owed by the second servant to the first. It amounted to a hundred pence -- or a hundred Roman coins called denarii, which were worth from 17 to 20 cents. The denarius was the usual wage for a whole day of common labor, so even a hundred denarii, or

twenty dollars, would not be easy to repay; but it would be infinitesimal in comparison to a debt of from ten to thirty million dollars.

Unless this huge and impossible debt should be paid, the debtor stood in jeopardy of being sold into slavery, along with his wife, his children, and all his possessions. This procedure was permitted by Mosaic law, but the rabbis thought it much too severe, and therefore the sale of a man and his family into slavery for debt was usually carried out only in the case of a flagrant theft. The custom was very common for even minor debt, however, under Roman law, and probably was familiar to the people of Palestine.

The insincerity and superficiality of the debtor servant are indicated by the fact that he seems to be either so ignorant or so arrogant that he still thinks and acts as if he can somehow repay the debt, huge and impossible as it is. He will not humble himself to ask that the debt be cancelled and forgiven; he merely asks that the Lord have patience and give him more time, although it is quite obvious that he could not earn or save enough in eternity to repay such a huge sum. The mercy of the King is shown in the fact that he gives the debtor more than he asks. Recognizing that the case is hopeless, that the servant is helpless, and that more time will not solve the problem, he cancels and forgives the debt completely.

The main point of the parable is approached as the story tells how the servant who was forgiven this huge debt finds a fellow-servant, who owed him an hundred pence. Now the real character of the unforgiving debtor begins to be apparent. He does not even make a reasonable, patient, polite, or gentlemanly appeal for payment, but seizes the smaller debtor by the throat and ruthlessly demands, "Pay me that thou owest." The second debtor, who might conceivably have paid the debt if given plenty of time, asks for an extension. He does not presume to ask for forgiveness or complete cancellation of the debt. The unforgiving debtor will not even grant him more time, but casts him into prison until he shall pay what he owes.

Then word of what had happened reaches the ears of the king, who again calls the first debtor before him, and reminds him of how much he has been forgiven. The Emphatic Greek Diaglott translation says at this point, "Was it not binding on thee to have had pity on thy fellow-servant?" In other words, there is an inescapable obligation for one who has received mercy to show mercy. Then the king or lord pronounces judgment: that the unforgiving debtor shall be delivered to the tormentors or jailers till he shall have paid all that is due -- all ten thousand talents. The hidden barb of this judgment is that since he obviously could never hope to repay all the debt in time or in eternity, the punishment is eternal, unending. He never gets out of prison; and justly so.

The lesson or moral of the parable is found in the last verse "So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses." Men who have been accepted into the kingdom of God have been forgiven a great debt -- the debt of sin. The wages or consequences of sin is eternal death. No man can ever repay that debt of sin in his own strength. More time would not help him in the least; the debt is too colossally huge. Only pride and arrogance would even suppose that the debt might be paid by one's own efforts. By means of the atonement and redemption provided by our heavenly Father through Jesus Christ, the debt is completely cancelled, paid, forgiven, forgotten. Humility confesses its helplessness, its complete inability to pay, and in meekness and gratitude accepts the mercy and forgiveness of the great King: then that same humility inspires similar complete forgiveness of the petty sins others have committed against us. If we do not forgive others, the lesson of the parable is that the debt which our Lord has forgiven us may be reinstated at any time, and payment demanded in full -- payment which we can never make.

So important is this principle that Jesus included it in the Lord's prayer: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," or as the Revised Standard version says, "as we have also forgiven our debtors," indicating that we much have already forgiven others before asking forgiveness for ourselves. We owe everything to God. No small forgiveness we can grant to a fellow-servant can amount to one six-hundred-thousandth of the debt which God has forgiven us -- the debt which Jesus paid that we might have eternal life. Let us remember that in the kingdom, God's forgiveness of us is absolutely dependent on our forgiveness of our fellow-servants.