

# The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

*Matthew 18:21-35*

## INTRODUCTION:

This morning we are going to be examining one of the parables of Christ. Now before we get into the parable I want to speak on what a parable is. A Parable is a short story of illustration to make us think, that has a point to it, but not all elements of the parable are to be taken literally. In other words the parable, or the short story, was to address the context of the conversation or teaching purpose, but not all elements of the parable are points of the Kingdom.

“In the ancient world, parables were a teaching tool. The word parable is an English transliteration of the Greek word *parabole*, which means “juxtaposition, comparison, illustration, analogy” (Liddell et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1305). In ancient Greek literature, the word could also have the connotation of moving side by side or indirectly, and therefore it could be used as an indirect way to teach a concept. Parables were fictional or illustrative stories, similar to a metaphor, and designed to teach a principle or lesson. The story of a parable often used comparison or hyperbole, and the story itself could be a model, analogy, or example of the intended lesson. By telling stories using the examples and situations familiar to people in a particular region and time, listeners could better relate to and understand what was being taught. Rhetoricians in antiquity also used parables to clarify or prove a point in an argument in a more interesting or more neutral way (Rhet. Her.). Although parables do not explicitly state their intended meaning, the basic lesson is usually obvious. Parables are always short, and focus on one principle or lesson, unlike allegorical stories which may be long and complex.”<sup>1</sup>

The parable we will be looking at this morning is the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant.

### C.S. Lewis

To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you...We all agree that forgiveness is a beautiful idea until we have to practice it.

This morning I want us to consider God’s expectation of forgiveness in light of His forgiving us. Tonight, in the Fall Series, we are going to watch a film that exemplifies the kind of forgiveness that God wants for all of His children to reflect and exhibit. So this morning we are going to be walking thru one of the parables of Christ to understand further how important Mercy exercised through forgiveness is in the paradigm of the Justice of God.

Let’s first begin with an illustration on how “history” plays a part in forgiveness.

**A man who was telling his friend about an argument he’d had with his wife commented, “Oh, how I hate it, every time we have an argument; she gets historical.”**

**The friend replied, “You mean hysterical.”**

**“No,” he insisted. “I mean historical. Every time we argue she drags up everything from the past and holds it against me!”**

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<sup>1</sup><https://drivethruhistoryadventures.com/parables-in-the-ancient-world-and-the-gospels/#:~:text=In%20the%20ancient%20world%2C%20parables%20were%20a%20teaching,as%20an%20indirect%20way%20to%20teach%20a%20concept.>

## *Matthew 18:21-35*

Then Peter came to Him and said, “Lord, how many times could my brother sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”

“I tell you, not as many as seven,” Jesus said to him, “but 70 times seven. For this reason, the kingdom of heaven can be compared to a king who wanted to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began to settle accounts, one who owed 10,000 talents was brought before him. Since he had no way to pay it back, his master commanded that he, his wife, his children, and everything he had be sold to pay the debt.

“At this, the slave fell facedown before him and said, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you everything!’ Then the master of that slave had compassion, released him, and forgave him the loan.

“But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him 100 denarii. He grabbed him, started choking him, and said, ‘Pay what you owe!’

“At this, his fellow slave fell down and began begging him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’ But he wasn’t willing. On the contrary, he went and threw him into prison until he could pay what was owed. When the other slaves saw what had taken place, they were deeply distressed and went and reported to their master everything that had happened.

“Then, after he had summoned him, his master said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Shouldn’t you also have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And his master got angry and handed him over to the jailers to be tortured until he could pay everything that was owed. So My heavenly Father will also do to you if each of you does not forgive his brother from his heart.”<sup>2</sup>

### **I. The Conversation in Question (21-22)**

**Simon J. Kistemaker in his book *The Parables* says**

Peter, trained in the Law and the Prophets as well as Jewish tradition, knew that he had to forgive his fellowman. He knew his duty. But what is the limit? Are there limits at all? Peter thought that he should go as far as seven times. That should be sufficient, he thought, and Jesus would most likely say, “Yes, Peter that is enough.” Does not unlimited mercy encourage a life of sin? Would Jesus not agree with Peter, “Enough is enough”?

But Jesus answer is, “I tell you, not seven times but seventy-seven times.” Jesus multiplies the two numbers 7 and 10 – numbers that symbolize completeness – and adds another 7. He means to say, not seven times but seventy-seven times – that is completeness times completeness and completeness. He conveys the idea of infinity. God’s mercy is so great that it cannot be measured; so you, Peter, should likewise show mercy to your neighbor.

<sup>2</sup>[\*The Holy Bible: Holman Christian standard version\*](#). (2009). (Mt 18:21–35). Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers.

## II. The Comparison of Illustration (23-34)

### **Part 1** – The Situation of a Servant

One subject owed him “10,000 talents” to the King. Now many of us have no idea what a “talent” is, but a “talent” is a unit of monetary value. One talent was valued at 6,000 drachmas (did this answer your question), which is the equivalent of about 20 years wages for a laborer. For an approximate modern equivalents, if a laborer earns \$15 per hour, at 2,000 hours per year he would earn \$30,000 per year, and one talent would equal \$600,000. So “10,000 talents” would hyperbolically represent and incalculable debt in today’s terms for a laborer of \$ 6 Billion. (24)

### **Part 2** – The Response of the Servant

The fellow servant owed the original servant 100 denari. So what is that equal to? 100 denari was equivalent to about 20 weeks of common labor, or about \$12,000 in today’s terms. This was still a large amount but nothing to the 6 billion dollar debt of the original servant. (28)

## III. The Clarity of Answer

### ***Matthew 5:7***

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

### ***Luke 19:1-10***

He entered Jericho and was passing through. <sup>2</sup> And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. <sup>3</sup> And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. <sup>4</sup> So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. <sup>5</sup> And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.” <sup>6</sup> So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. <sup>7</sup> And when they saw it, they all grumbled, “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” <sup>8</sup> And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.” <sup>9</sup> And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. <sup>10</sup> For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

### ***Matthew 6:14-15***

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, <sup>15</sup> but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

### **N.T. Wright in New Testament For Everyone – Matthew Part 2**

The key thing, as I have already said, is not that one should therefore swallow all resentment and ‘forgive and forget’ as though nothing had happened. The key thing is that one should never, ever give up making forgiveness and reconciliation one’s goal. If confrontation has to happen, as it often does, it must always be with forgiveness in mind, never revenge.

But underneath that there is another lesson, more subtle perhaps but equally important. Why does Jesus solemnly say, in the last verse, that those who refuse to forgive will themselves be refused forgiveness? Isn’t that, to put it bluntly, so harsh as to be out of keeping with the rest of the **gospel**? Can’t God override our failings at exactly that point?

Apparently not. At least, I don’t know about ‘can’t’, but it seems that he won’t. The New Testament speaks with one voice on this subject. Forgiveness isn’t like a Christmas present that a kindly grandfather can go ahead and give to a sulky grandchild even if the grandchild hasn’t bought a single gift for anyone else. It isn’t like the meal that will be waiting for you back home even if you failed to buy a cheese sandwich and a cup of tea for a tramp on the street. It’s a different sort of thing altogether.

Forgiveness is more like the air in your lungs. There’s only room for you to inhale the next lungful when you’ve just breathed out the previous one. If you insist on withholding it, refusing to give someone else the kiss of life they may desperately need, you won’t be able to take any more in yourself, and you will suffocate very quickly. Whatever the spiritual, moral and emotional equivalent of the lungs may be (we sometimes say ‘the heart’, but that of course is a metaphor as well), it’s either open or closed. If it’s open, able and willing to forgive others, it will also be open to receive God’s love and forgiveness. But if it’s locked up to the one, it will be locked up to the other.

## **CONCLUSION:**

**A friend of Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, once reminded her of an especially cruel thing that had been done to her years before. But Miss Barton seemed not to recall it. “Don’t you remember it?” her friend asked.**

**“No,” came the reply, “I distinctly remember forgetting it.”**

**You can’t be free and happy if you harbor grudges, so put them away. Get rid of them. Collect postage stamps, or collect coins, if you wish—but don’t collect grudges.**