

4. The Unmerciful Servant (Matt 18:21-35)

The account of the parable of the unmerciful servant begins with a question brought to the Lord by Peter:

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

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

Jesus' answer to Peter was in sharp contrast to the practice of the Jews and the teaching of the Law of Moses. Jesus had set the standard for Christian behavior in the Sermon on the Mount in Matt 5:38-42:

38 "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' 39 But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. 40 And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. 41 If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. 42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."

Most versions translate *seventy-seven* with the equally acceptable *seventy times seven*. Metaphorically, this gives no end to the number of times Christians are to forgive one another. The metaphoric meaning is that we are to always forgive our brother.

The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

23 "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. 25 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."

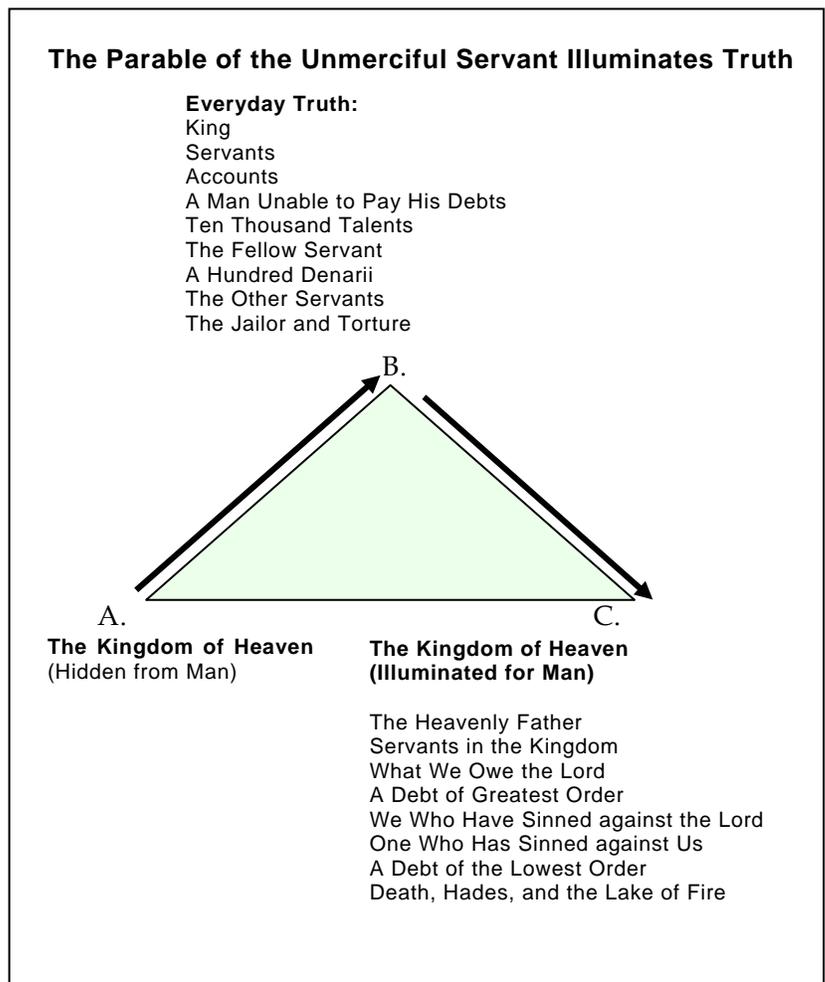
26 "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' 27 The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go."

28 "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded."

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

30 "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened."

32 "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged



me to. 33 *Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?* 34 *In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.*

35 *"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."*

In contrast to the parable of the sower and the parable of the weeds, this is the first parable in this study where the reader must supply the one to one relationship between the parts of the parable and the overarching lesson about the kingdom of heaven. Once again, readers must look to find the hidden truth of God, illuminated in this simple story. With the parable in mind, one can easily see the illuminated truth of God.

The king is the heavenly Father. Everything that we have and do—including our hope of an eternal life— comes from the Father. Our debts are great beyond our ability to pay. Peter wrote in James 1:17, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” According to Paul in Eph 1:3-4, God’s blessings include *every spiritual blessing*, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.” Acts 17:28 teaches, “For in him we live and move and have our being.” Our debts of sin and death were paid for with the blood of the only begotten son. In Rom 6:23, Paul wrote, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

The servants are the servants in the kingdom of heaven. All the servants of God are sinful and need His grace. The grace came through Jesus, the son. Titus 2:11-14 reads:

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. 12 It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, 13 while we wait for the blessed hope — the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, 14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

Yet, these servants continue to be vulnerable to the sins of the mind and flesh; some more than others. The servants must, therefore, petition the Father to forgive us our debts. In 1 John 1:8-10, John explains this, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.”

The accounts are what we owe the heavenly Father. The accounts are the record of what the Lord’s servants owe Him. Matt 25:19 uses the idea of settling spiritual accounts in the parable of the talents. Rev 20:12-13 portrays the final and conclusive settling of spiritual accounts:

12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. 13 The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done.

Our debt is of the greatest order. The 10,000 talents— millions of dollars to us—represent a debt to God of the greatest order. The metaphor offers an amount that is, theoretically, impossible to pay back. Only through the grace of God and the blood of Jesus is man redeemed. Left alone, man is hopelessly lost.

A servant who has the very great debt is all those who have sinned against the Lord. If we as sinners petition the Lord, he will forgive us our debts. If we faithfully ask, God will forgive us.

The fellow servant is the one who has sinned against us. The wicked servant made no application and transfer of the principle of God’s grace given to him, and the principle of the grace that he should extend to a fellow servant of God. However, Jesus had taught from the beginning that fellow servants should forgive one another, even as the father forgives them. Jesus taught the disciples to pray in Matt 6:12-15:

12 Forgive us our debts ,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
13 And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.'

14 For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.
15 But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

John taught in 1 John 5:16-17 that if anyone sees a brother sin, a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray for him:

If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that. 17 All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.

The hundred *denarii*—a few dollars—represents a minor debt, of little consequence and of the lowest order. Compared to the forgiveness of the Lord of our great debt, forgiving our brethren is inconsequential. The wicked servant could not manage this forgiveness. When man compares his spiritual debt to the heavenly Father, he should see that his brother's debt amounts to nothing.

The jailor and torture represent man's final punishment if he is unforgiving. Rev 20:14-15 teaches that those whose names are not in the book of life will be thrown in the lake of fire. What is at risk if we do not forgive our brother is our eternal life.

Conclusion

The parable of the unfaithful servant teaches two overarching lessons. The episode began with Peter's question in Matt 18:21:

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

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

The lesson drawn from the parable is that a Christian is always to forgive a fellow Christian.

The second overarching lesson is that one with which the Lord concluded in Matt 18: 35 "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." Not forgiving our brethren may result in the loss of our eternal soul. The Lord's last words were explicit: "Forgive your brother from your heart." No pretences, no artificial accommodation before the church, no secret thought of "I'll get you back later," will do. The Lord expects forgiveness from the heart for as many times as it takes.

Questions

1. How many numerical times are we to forgive a fellow servant? _____
2. How great is our debt to God? _____
3. How great is our brother's debt to us? _____
4. How does Christ instruct us to pray about our debts? _____
5. What must happen before the Lord forgives us our debt? _____
6. Metaphorically, are we to forgive our brother? _____
7. What may our fate be if we do not forgive our brother? _____