

The Parables of Jesus

-The Unmerciful Servant

-Matthew 18:23-35

This parable is found only in the Gospel of Matthew. It is actually given in the same setting which began in Luke 14:28 and goes to Luke 16:31. Jesus was leaving Capernaum and was on a road that was leading to Jerusalem. It would be during this final trip to Jerusalem that He would be arrested,

tried and crucified. This parable is one of the many parables Jesus used in this time of teaching to His disciples, the publicans and sinners, as well as the Pharisees and scribes.

Matthew's Gospel and Luke's Gospel together give us a broad look at the in depth teaching that Jesus gave during this time, as well as some other events that took place in Capernaum. Capernaum was Jesus' "unofficial" base of operations in the region of Galilee throughout His ministry. This would be the last time He would be in this region. As mention, He was headed to Jerusalem and therefore, the cross.

In Matthew's account as found in Matthew 18:1-11, Jesus speaks about "offending the little ones." In Luke 17:1, 2 we see that Luke gives us the same exact account. Therefore, this parable in Matthew fits into the same time frame and fits into the exact place where it would be in context with Luke's account of Jesus teaching His disciples that day on the side of a road outside of Capernaum.

In Matthew 18:7-9 and in Luke 17:1-4, Jesus discusses that they, as His disciples, should not be naive in thinking that "offences" will not happen, both to them and by them to others. This is just a fact of life. He was telling them that they should not live in "La La Land" and think that everyone would be changed instantaneously, them included. He was very truthful with them. They, themselves, will experience being offended by others and, unfortunately, they most likely, being human, will offend others.

However, Jesus stresses the point of telling His disciples to be extremely mindful and careful to not offend those entrusted to them by Himself and the Father. He refers to them as "these little ones." These "little ones" are not just referring to children but Jesus is also referencing the "publicans and sinners" for they as well are looked upon by God as "children." We read this in both Matthew and Luke.

- Matthew 18:6, 10 - *"But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven."*
- Luke 17:1-2 - *"...but woe unto him, through whom they come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones."*

Jesus goes on to teach about keeping their hearts pure through forgiveness when they experience those times of being "offended" by others - which they definitely would experience. Again we read this both Matthew and Luke.

- Matthew 18:15-18 - *"Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."*
- Luke 17:3 - *"Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him."*

Jesus then discusses the proper course of action in restoring relationship when a fellow believer does indeed offend you or others within the Body of Christ. We see this in Matthew 18:15-20. In Matthew 18:21, we see that after hearing Jesus teach on correction and the desire to restore relationship with others, Peter came to Him and asked, "...Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Why did Peter use the expression "seven times seven?"

The Jewish rabbis at the time taught that forgiving someone more than three times was unnecessary. They cited Amos 1:3-13 where God forgave Israel's enemies three times, then punished them. Peter, being Jewish, knew this. Remember, God never gave us that nor did He say that in His Word. It was the rabbis who took the wrong understanding of the scriptures and made it into a tradition that they followed.

Peter therefore, stating and using the number seven (as being the number of completion) and thereby doubling the number stated by the rabbis as they saw it in Amos, may have wanted to add to Jesus' teaching and say how wonderful it would be for Jesus' disciples to now forgive others "seven times." That would show that they were better than the rabbis, the Pharisees and the Scribes. Obviously, Peter was missing the point. It was not the number of times to forgive but rather it was the "attitude of the heart" when forgiving the offense of others that is important.

Jesus, in love, understanding that Peter, and most likely the other disciples were missing the point, responded by stating as we see in both Matthew and Luke:

- Matthew 18:22 - "... I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven."
- Luke 17:4 - *And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him."*

As you can imagine, this was quite a shock to the disciples. That is why we read in Luke's account that they all blurt out, "...Lord, increase our faith." In response to the disciple's cry for help in this matter, in Luke's account, Jesus uses the analogy of a mustard seed.

We must take note here that this usage of the analogy of a mustard seed is different than that of which Jesus uses in Matthew 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32 and Luke 13:18-19 where the mustard seed grew into a tree which was symbolic of the soon coming Body of Christ – the Church on this earth. Here, within the context of this teaching, Jesus uses the mustard seed analogy to express another point – "faith," thereby answering the disciple's request to "increase our faith."

Actually, they were stating the obvious. What Jesus had said concerning the "seventy times seven," seemed to them to be impossible. If that is what it meant to follow Jesus, then they needed a boost in their trusting of Him and who He was. To their natural understanding this seemed "crazy." However, that is the essence of "the faith." Trusting that Jesus and His words will never lead us astray and even though they may be difficult (and sometimes seem crazy) to obey and follow, it is our total trust in Jesus and in who He is that will carry us forward in obedience.

Jesus goes on to describe how just a "little faith," using the analogy of the size of a "mustard seed," would grow into. That "mustard seed" faith that "little starter faith" means choosing not to go by what is the "letter of the law" or what they would feel like doing or not doing; what may seem impossible and even "crazy" to do. It involves not only a total lifestyle change but it involves a totally new way of thinking. It involves totally trusting in what Jesus is now teaching them.

To be disciples of Jesus, we must be totally "sold out" to whatever Jesus teaches and exhorts us in doing. That is the beginning of walking in faith. That is the "mustard seed," the "starter faith," that Jesus is expressing. A disciple of Jesus chooses to change their lifestyle, their entire way of thinking, and turns from the ways of the old sinful nature to that of the nature of a "born again child of God." This is the beginning of

faith and that is the essence of “the faith” - placing your total trust and confidence in God and His Word, His precepts, His principles and His ways.

We must remember that the only way any disciple of Jesus could possibly walk in the type of forgiveness and mercy that Jesus walked in was and is to place their total trust and confidence in Jesus and who He is. Walking in "Christ-like" forgiveness can only be truly accomplished in and through a total trust in Jesus and through the inflowing of the Holy Spirit with the believer's life.

Having this total trust and confidence (faith) in Jesus and His teachings would allow His disciples to walk in power and authority that would be able to cast aside every obstacle within themselves (their own personal "sycamore tree") that would hinder them from walking in this love, mercy, forgiveness and compassion. In Matthew's account, Jesus used the parable of the "Unmerciful Servant" to teach on what this Christ-like forgiveness is and what it is not. We can see this because Jesus begins this parable by saying "**For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to...**" (Matthew 18:23) Jesus was giving this parable in reference to His answer to Peter concerning the “seventy times seven” and their exclamation to, “increase our faith.”

The Parable of the “Unmerciful Servant” - Matthew 18:23-35 - "Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents. But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped 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. But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellowservants, 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 fellowservant 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 fellowservants 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: Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, 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 hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses."

As we go forward in our discussion, let's first look at the “characters” in this parable

- A "certain king" – This, undoubtedly, was representative of God, the Father. Jesus shows us that the Father gives each of us a responsibility and that we are accountable to Him for that which He has given each of us in serving Him. We are shown that God takes this very serious.
- The "servant" that owed the king a large debt that he could not pay. This is representative of every single person who ever lived, was living at that time, as well as today - Jew or Gentile. The “large debt” showed that this first servant was not doing what he was asked to do in his service to the king. Instead, he misused what was given to him and actually ran up a great debt instead of being a good and faithful servant to the king.
- A "fellow servant" that owed the first servant a small debt that he could not pay. This is simply representative of our fellow man - Jew and Gentile. Notice, that this servant was called a “fellow servant” which meant that they were both on the same level plain and they were both to be serving the same king. Jesus states that this servant did not owe the king anything. He may have been faithful in doing his service unto the king – we are not told. The problem was that he got himself in trouble with the first servant.

In our parable we see that the king came to "settle the accounts" of the kingdom. All the servants would know that this day would ultimately come so this was not a total surprise to the first servant. It was only a "surprise" because he was not ready or prepared for the king's coming. It sneaked upon him "like a thief in the night." We are told that this servant owed the king "ten-thousand talents."

No one can be sure what a "talent" was worth at that time. We do know that it referred to the largest unit of currency, either monetarily or agriculturally, at the time. Therefore, one talent represented a rather large sum of money or a large measurement of some type of grain or farm product. Some sources think that one talent was worth more than 15-20 years worth of wages for an average worker, which would mean that the debt of 10,000 talents would be at least 150,000 years worth of wages.

Some "scholars" estimate that the value of a talent in New Testament times was valued at somewhere between \$1,000 to \$30,000 dollars today, making what this man owed would be between "\$10,000,000.00 to \$30,000,000.00. According to New Nave's Topical Bible, one who possessed five talents of gold or silver was a multimillionaire by today's standards. Whatever the exact amount might have been, the exaggerated point that Jesus was making was that this servant was in great trouble owning a large debt that he could not pay back to the king.

It is difficult to imagine that such a large amount would have been given to the servant to begin with. Most likely, the original amount would have been smaller. However, the amount increased over time because of interest and the servant most likely kept asking the king for more because of his poor management over what he was given. The king in his graciousness gave him the original amount and may have given him more over time when the servant asked. What the scenario may have been, this first servant was not using what the king had given him in a proper manner that would serve and honor his king.

The servant knew that the day would come when he would have to repay the king. However, the servant did know the exact day when the account would need to be settled. He kept telling himself that it would not be "today." Every "today" he kept telling himself that until their came a time when he thought "today" would never be **THAT** day. Unfortunately, for him **THAT** day had come... and he could not pay.

In order to have the amount the servant owed paid for; the king orders that this servant be sold, along with his family and everything he owns. This penalty for nonpayment may seem like a harsh example for Jesus to use, however, this was a standard procedure in those days and one in which his listeners would be able to relate to and be familiar with. It would not be an uncommon thing to happen to a servant and his family if there was a nonpayment of debt - especially to a king. We must remember that Jesus is using this in a parable. He was not advocating this process but rather using it to make His point.

The servant pleads with the king. Notice what this servant pleads to the king. Notice the words he uses to plead to the king to give him time. Remember these words!!! - Matthew 18:26 - *The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, **have patience with me, and I will pay thee all.***

The king, showing his graciousness is moved with compassion and chooses to not only give him more time to pay but he to chose to **totally cancel** ("loosed him ") the debt. The king not only cancelled the debt but he forgave this servant of his total lack of integrity, his total lack of care for his family - totally!!! The king expressed grace, mercy and forgiveness to this most "unworthy" of servants.

This servant then leaves the king's presence. By the way, we do not hear even a "thank you" out of that servant's mouth. On his way out, the servant meets one of his "fellow servants" who happened to owed him a hundred pence This "fellow servant" might have been next in line to "settle accounts" with the king. It seems as though, even though this fellow servant may have owed the first servant, he was ready to meet and settle his account with the king.

To put a little perspective on this – remember the large amount we discussed that the first servant owed the king? Well, this “fellow servant” only owed a “pence” to the first servant. A “pence” is again a unit of currency, either monetary or agriculturally. It would amount to about 100 days worth of wages as well as a much, much smaller amount of money or measurement.

As Jesus tells the parable, this first servant, who just came out from the king's presence being forgiven of such a great debt, now meets this fellow servant, takes him by the throat and screams at him, “*Pay me that thou owest.*”- Matthew 18:28. Notice, what the “fellow servant” pleads to the first servant in Matthew 18:29 - “*And his fellowservant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all.*” Sound familiar? These are the exact same words that the first servant cried out to the king. The same exact words!!! However, this time they fell on deaf ears.

The first servant goes and throws this fellow servant into what is called a “debtors prison.” This was literally a prison where people who owed money would work to pay off a debt. They would make next to nothing for their day's “work.” The amount “earned” would be placed into an account with the name of the person they owed the debt to. Whatever the person earned would go to the one who the debt was owed until they worked and earned enough to pay the debt along with any interest that may have been accrued. The conditions in these “debtors’ prisons” were so bad and the wages earned was so minute, that if sent to one, it would be liken to a death sentence or at the minimum a life sentence.

The witnessing of what just took place greatly distressed the other servants of the king. They went and told the king what had happened. The king immediately, calls the first servant back before him. Another time of “reckoning” for this servant had come. Unfortunately, all the events that took place truly revealed what was in the heart of this first servant. His heart was not only dishonest towards his king and the king's affairs but he was also a despicable person in how he treated others within the king's realm. It also revealed a deep rooted hypocrisy within his heart.

Unfortunately, he did not learn anything from his encounter with his gracious, merciful and forgiving king. His heart was hard and deceitful. He was not teachable and refused to soften his heart even though he was shown such grace and mercy by being forgiven of the tremendous debt he had owed. Oh and by the way, we must remember, that his debt was by his own doing and by his own wicked ways and incorrect attitude of heart towards his king.

The king expresses this in Matthew 18:32, 33 - “*...O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee?*” Notice, the heart of the servant is expressed by the king – it was full of wickedness and would not be changed even though he was shown mercy, compassion and forgiveness.

This servant is handed over to the torturers. This was another term for being handed over to those who run the “debtor's prison.” The servant was sentenced to this place to “pay off the debt.” This servant's debt was so very, very, very much that it would be totally impossible for him to work it off. It did not matter. Because of the hardness of his heart he “made his own bed and now he was going to sleep in it” - forever. It truly was “death sentence.”

Jesus concludes this parable with words that truly sum up the whole parable in no uncertain terms. Matthew 18:35 - “*So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.*”

We must remember the full context of this parable. Remember, it was not a “stand alone” parable that came out of nowhere. It was part of a lengthy teaching to His disciples. This parable was in response to Jesus' teaching the disciples to be ready when offences come your way. It was in response to the exhortation to not offend the “little ones.” It was in response to Peter's query about forgiving seven times

according to the Law. Along with the analogy of the "mustard seed" in Luke 17:6, this parable was in response to the crying out of the disciples, when told that they were to forgive "seventy times seven," blurting out, "*Lord, increase our faith.*"

The principle is clear. God has forgiven each of us such a great debt. Each and every one of us was just as wicked and guilty as the first servant when it came to the affairs of God. Each of us deserved to be handed over to the tormentors to spend eternity in darkness, separated from God. Yet, because of God, the Father's grace and mercy, He sent Jesus who took our place and received the punishment that we deserved for our failures and sin. Through Jesus, our "debt" which was worthy of eternal damnation, has been not only forgiven but also has been paid in full. Any debt, any offense that has been done to us by any one of our "fellow servants" pales and is absolutely insignificant in comparison.

I must admit that this is very difficult and a very difficult part of the believer's life. I can see myself just as exasperated as the disciples were after they heard Jesus' statement concerning forgiving "seventy times seven." I can see myself "chiming in" along with the disciples as they cried out, "*Lord, increase our faith!*"

Jesus makes it clear that the believer can only live out this type of forgiveness if the attitude of their heart is correct. The attitude of heart of the true disciple of Christ is to be one that chooses to walk in a lifestyle that reflects and expresses the lifestyle of Jesus. The lifestyle of the disciple of Jesus should be expressing the "the Father's heart and character," including this most important area of grace, mercy and forgiveness to all they come in contact with.

This is what was manifested and seen in the lifestyle of Jesus. It must be manifested and seen in the lifestyle of His disciples. We can only walk in this type of lifestyle of grace, mercy and forgiveness through the Holy Spirit that has now been made available to the believer in Christ.