



Parables of Grace & Responsibility

The parables in this lesson, especially the parable of the Unforgiving Servant, are two of the most revealing and compelling of all Jesus' parables. They reveal both the nature of parables and the essence of Jesus' kingdom message. They focus primarily on grace and responsibility but also could be grouped with parables of discipleship.

God's gracious forgiveness of us is a gift without measure, as enormous as the ten thousand talent debt of the servant in our first parable. However, that is not the debt for which God holds us responsible. As with the first servant, our responsibility lies in how we respond to others in a forgiving way. It is all too easy to sing the praises of God's grace for *me*, while holding on tight to a spirit quick to judge and slow to forgive *you*. We are debtors to God's mercy and according to Jesus we are obliged to show mercy. Such are the limits of forgiveness, and these limits are not discerned in asking a numerical response to "how many times do I have to forgive?" Rather, such limits can only be discovered in asking "how much has God forgiven me?" Only then do we discern the means and measure of our forgiving others.

Forgiveness is pure grace, but it is grace that transforms, creates love and relationship, and requires — even demands — a response. Jesus' parables demonstrate the presence of the kingdom, the forgiveness made available to sinners, and the responsibility that comes with grace. In other words, the forgiveness of God must be replicated in the lives of the forgiven. If we care about what God has done for us, gratitude that responds and acts will be present.

The Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:21-35)

This parable depicts the forgiveness of God, the necessity of humans forgiving because God forgives, and the warning of judgment for those who fail to forgive.

Background:

- A "**talent**" is a measurement of weight of gold, silver, or copper. It varied but was between approximately 60 to 90 pounds. Ten thousand talents would be about 204 metric tons. Depending on which metal was used, a talent was the equivalent of about 6000 denarii, which would make **the first servant's debt 60,000,000 denarii**. And at one denarius a day (as in Matt 20:2), this would require a day laborer **over 164,000 years to repay!**

Interpretation:¹

The main point of specifying the amount of money owed by the first servant is that the debt is so high that no possibility exists of the servant ever paying it. The TNIV is the first translation to fully capture the enormity of this sum by rendering it “billions of dollars.” Apart from kings, only a very few in the ancient world would ever come close to owning this amount of money, much less owing it to anyone. These were the Warren Buffets of Jesus’ world.

The sum that the second servant owed, on the other hand, was one hundred denarii, that is, one hundred days’ minimum wages. The TNIV’s “few hundred dollars” is an improvement over the NIV’s “a few dollars.” But even at as low a rate as five dollars an hour today, a hundred days’ earnings would come to four thousand dollars. The sum in its own right is significant enough. It’s just that it’s ludicrously small compared with the first servant’s debt. Jesus intends for his story to enrage his audience. He also teaches about God and his ways with humanity, and that leads us to the parable’s three central lessons. These lessons emerge both from the three principal characters in the story and from the three main scenes into which it divides.

★ **The first lesson deals with the king’s lavish grace in forgiving debts.** The king’s behavior leads to the central focus of the first episode, which spans verses 23–27. Clearly the point of the king’s canceling so massive a debt is to display his enormous grace. That’s why Jesus created the story with a servant owing such a huge debt in the first place. That the king wanted to settle accounts was realistic enough (v. 23), but as soon as we are told that a man comes owing “billions of dollars” (v. 24), we are meant to imagine there is no way he could ever repay his debt.

- Verse 25 suggests that the king, even before forgiving the man’s debt, is a generous man, because he proposes only that the servant and his family be sold into slavery. Sadly enough, selling people into slavery to recoup debts was common in first-century Israel. Sometimes Jews who were bankrupt voluntarily sold themselves into slavery, so at least they would be cared for. But the sum that such a sale would net could hardly have equaled even a tiny fraction of this servant’s debt. A harsher king could easily have ordered that the man and/or his family be sent to debtors’ prison or even to their execution.
- Nor is it likely that the extra time the servant attempts to negotiate in verse 26 would have changed his situation. Again, he might have been able to earn back a little bit of the amount he owed, but no form of employment could have made a large dent in a total bill of “billions of dollars.”
- The king’s magnanimity stands out on every count. Clearly his behavior depicts God’s grace in forgiving our sins, when we add up all the things we have done to fall short of his infinitely perfect and holy standards, combined with all the things we have not done that could have pleased him. Our sins are as enormous as a billion-dollar debt. There is no way in the world we can ever repay it. If it is to be forgiven, it must be wholly of God’s grace.

★ **The second lesson, juxtaposed with the first, deals with the absurdity of spurning such grace.** The treatment of the second servant forms the heart of this scene or episode. Almost as unimaginable as the king’s forgiveness is the first servant’s response.

- Jesus highlights the contrast between the two men by using parallel wording in verses 26 and 29. Both servants approach their masters by falling on their knees. Both beg their masters with the words, “Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.” But verses 27 and 30 reflect as opposite a pair of reactions to the pleas as Jesus could have portrayed. The king forgives the enormous, unpayable debt. The servant just forgiven that debt has his fellow servant thrown into prison.
- Little wonder that the second man’s fellow servants were “greatly distressed” and told their master everything that happened (v. 31). The word used here could also be translated “outraged.” We’re meant to react to Jesus’ story with distress and anger as well. This is an example of appropriate tattling, and we are supposed to sympathize.

¹ Excerpted from Craig L. Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables*, pp. 71-80

★ **The aftermath of the servants telling their master about what had happened leads to the third episode in verses 32–34 and to the ultimate destiny of the first servant. The third lesson that the parable teaches deals with the alarming fate awaiting the unforgiving.**

- Now we see another side of the king as well. He can exhibit lavish, unprecedented love, but he can also unleash righteous anger and punishment. The logic of verses 32–33 is inescapable. One man was forgiven so enormous a debt. How could he possibly refuse to show mercy to his fellow servant, who owed a comparatively paltry debt? It is precisely because God is a God of such compassion and mercy that he cannot possibly accept as his those devoid of compassion and mercy.
- The parable seems to have resolved itself in a satisfactory way that fits our sense of justice. But then comes Jesus' concluding application in verse 35, which makes plain the lesson behind it all: "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive a brother or sister from your heart."
- Jesus makes it clear that the king represents God, the heavenly Father. The disciples would have understood this, because kings in the parables of the rabbis regularly stood for God. The servants then naturally stand for the people of this world, every potential disciple or follower of God, as he has now revealed himself in Jesus Christ. Each would-be disciple must identify with the greatly indebted servant, and the people who wrong us are like the first man's fellow servants.
- To sum up the parable, Jesus is essentially declaring that the debt God has forgiven us is so enormous that any refusal on our part to forgive other people is as ludicrous in comparison as this man's behavior in the parable and that God will be equally stern in his response to such lack of forgiveness.

Applying the Parable²:

- ◆ **After what God in Christ has done for us, could we ever absolutely refuse to make any attempt to forgive those who have sinned against us?** It seems that the point of Jesus' parable of the Unforgiving Servant, as harsh as it may sound, is that the answer to that question is "No." If we have truly sensed how much we have owed God, how much we have broken relationship with God through our actions, *and* how much God in Christ has forgiven us, through no merit of our own—if we truly understand these concepts and have received that forgiveness, we could never act in such a way as the servant in this parable. True Christians could never absolutely refuse to forgive one another, choosing instead to inflict the worst possible vengeance.
- ◆ **The message of this parable is badly needed by churches and individuals who live in a society where people insist on standing on their own rights when division exists in their churches, families, and societies.** The teaching of the parable is counterintuitive, but it is possibly the most forceful expression of how Christians should live. Christian living — rather than insisting on rights — should be a continual dispensing of mercy and forgiveness, mirroring God's own character and treatment of his people.
- ◆ **The NT ethic is responsive and reflective, one that responds to God's prior acts of mercy and reflects his actions in our lives.** Unfortunately forgiveness and mercy are often least at home in our churches, and our society views forgiveness as weakness. Society also cheapens forgiveness so that sin is treated lightly, but the focus on judgment in Jesus' parables warns that forgiveness brings with it a call for change. If forgiveness does not effect change, it is not experienced.
- ◆ **What would our church and our relationships look like if we followed the order of Matthew 18 and**
(1) looked in humility to ourselves first, (2) looked at the causes of sin in the world, (3) took seriously God's care and seeking for those who stray (knowing that it is not God's will that one of these persons is destroyed), (4) spoke truth without ignoring the sin, (5) set no limits for forgiveness, and (6) emphasized the necessity of forgiveness modeled on God's own forgiveness, knowing that judgment is severe for those who do not forgive?

² Excerpted from Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, pp. 62-76.

The Two Debtors (Luke 7:41-43; 36-50)³

Claude Montefiore, a Jewish NT scholar, described “this exquisite parable [as]...one of the treasured religious possessions of the Western world.” Although neglected, it deserves to be ranked with the most revealing stories of the Christian faith. While it is not as explicit as the parable of the Unforgiving Servant, the same themes of grace and responsibility show clearly.

Background:

- **Setting:** The setting is a dinner held by Simon, a Pharisee. An unnamed woman enters Simon’s house, and, although uninvited, begins to anoint Jesus’ feet with perfume and wash them with her tears. Luke identifies her as a woman known in that city to be a sinner. This descriptor ties her to the accusation leveled at Jesus in the immediate context: “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (7:34). It seems that this woman knows of Jesus’ reputation and has likely even experienced his ministry. Her gratitude exhibited by the actions of weeping and kissing Jesus’ feet point in this direction (7:38).
- **Customary Hospitality:** A Pharisee was not obligated to wash Jesus’ feet, anoint him with oil, and greet him with a kiss, but he should have provided water so that Jesus could wash his own feet. A kiss would have been an appropriate greeting and a way to honor a guest. Kissing someone’s feet was the ultimate way to express honor, gratitude, and submission, but it was also an act of deep humility.
- **The Woman’s Actions:** Anointing with oil was a common procedure, but anointing with costly perfume (as in 7:37) was unusual. Anointing the feet would have been highly unusual, and anointing them with perfume would have also been an extravagant and almost certainly offensive act, especially from a sinful woman. To anoint Jesus’ feet, kiss them repeatedly, and dry them with her hair would all have been viewed as shameful acts, *if* it were not for her tears, and clearly the woman did not intend the acts to be erotic. Women sometimes let their hair down for other reasons, especially to show religious devotion/gratitude or grief, either of which could be the case here.
- **Meals:** Particularly within a Jewish context, it was at least an honor to have a respected teacher as a guest for a meal. In calling Jesus a teacher the Pharisee gave him a title of respect and honor. Pharisees viewed meals as an opportunity for study and they were extremely concerned with ritual purity at meals. This only heightens for Jesus’ Pharisaic host the offensive character of the woman’s actions.

Interpretation:

- Central to this passage is the portrayal of the woman as one who demonstrates trust in and love for Jesus. Jesus tells a brief parable to Simon to illustrate that those who have had a great debt canceled will love more than those who have only a small debt forgiven (7:40-43).
 - *“Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”*
- The parable makes two main points: God forgives sin freely, and one forgiven more will love more. At least one forgiven *should* love more, but gratitude is not automatic, as the parable of the Unforgiving Servant attests. This parable expresses the grace and goodness of God. When it comes to forgiveness, God is like a moneylender who does not care about money.
- Jesus then applies his parable to the woman who has welcomed him as a lavish host would welcome a most honored guest. While some of the actions that Jesus mentions as signs of welcome (7:44-46) go above and beyond what might be expected in first-century hospitality, the point is that the woman in her actions has provided lavish hospitality because of her great love for Jesus and his mercy. Simon has done nothing to express any care at all, whereas the woman was extravagant in her love, which Jesus took as either evidence of or grounds for forgiveness.

³ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, pp. 77-91.

- Luke is not concerned with our questions about the woman's repentance. He assumes that if the reader understands forgiveness granted and love expressed, repentance will take care of themselves. Repentance in this text is assumed, or else talk about "her many sins" and forgiveness makes no sense. What Luke emphasizes is that with Jesus forgiveness is being dispensed and people like this sinful woman took full advantage of it and found peace and salvation, even while people like the Pharisee could not understand or accept what was happening.
- The story concludes with Jesus' declaration that her sins are forgiven, which causes the other guests to wonder who is this Jesus who can even forgive sins. Surely Jesus' words were intended as a challenge to Simon to reconsider both his own stance (maybe he is not so small a debtor) and his attitudes toward both the woman and Jesus. He cannot be righteous if he does not show the compassion of God.

Applying the Parable:

- **For both this parable and that of the Unforgiving Servant, one central focus is response.** The kingdom comes with limitless grace in the midst of an evil world, but grace that does not bring forth a response is grace unknown. Christians today too frequently think grace can be received without effect and without response. That is impossible. Is the lukewarm nature of our commitment to God because we have a very small sense of a huge debt forgiven? If we care about what God has done for us, gratitude that responds and acts will be present.
- **Part of that response will be to develop the ability actually to see people.** If anything was true of Jesus, he could see people — not just look at them. We need to be able to see beyond the obvious and the form of people to see who they actually are, what their needs are, and what their potential is. Only then can the love of God find an avenue through us.
- **The woman in this parable teaches us the importance of emotion, of not taking forgiveness for granted but having some sense of its value.** This is what gave her a deep love and commitment to Jesus. We should not downplay the importance of this woman's response. The similarity of her act of anointing Jesus' feet and drying them with her hair to his act of washing the feet of the disciples and drying them with a towel is obvious, as love is marked as the motivation for both (Luke 7:47 & John 13:1). The woman modeled the humility Jesus expressed.
- **None of us actually fits in a "lessor debtor" category.** This means that disdain for others and attitudes of superiority have no place with Christians. The implications of this parable for issues of separation from sin and "the world" are large. Clearly separation cannot entail separation from people. Christians do not have the right to reject "outcasts." Even when rejecting specific actions, Christians must be willing to embrace sinners without affirming actions that are clearly wrong. Holiness, at least true holiness, is stronger and more contagious than sin. A wideness of soul is extended to people to help them move toward faith and obedience.
- **Grace and responsibility are not about cheap grace, nor is grace ever without responsibility.** Forgiveness is without limits but not without responsibility, confession, truth, and even restitution. Cancellation of debts is pure grace, but it is grace that transforms, creates love and relationship, and requires — even demands — a response. Jesus' parable and the dialogue accompanying it demonstrate the presence of the kingdom, the forgiveness made available to sinners, and the responsibility that comes with grace.

Discussion

1. Prior to Jesus telling the parable of the Unforgiving Servant, Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive a brother or sister who sins against him – “as many as seven times?” (18:21).
 - Why do you think he asks this? Does “seven” seem like a lot?
 - Do we have a baseline number of our own (e.g. “three strikes & you’re out”), and is it greater or less than seven? Why?
2. Jesus’ story concerns debts, something that can be measured in units of money. How do we see “sins” or “offenses” as being similar to debts? (For instance, how was the debt incurred? To whom is the debt owed? How does someone repay the kind of debt it is? etc.) How do we see them as being different? Are some sins or offenses more like debts than others? Which ones? What difference might our answer make for how we understand this story?
3. What kinds of “sins” do you imagine Peter had in mind? Were they the same or different from the ones Jesus has in mind when he tells the parable...and what makes us think this? When we hear the parable, what examples come to our minds? How do those specific examples affect the way we understand the story?
4. When we translate the amounts owed by the servants into modern figures, we realize the first servant’s debt amounted to billions of dollars, whereas the second servant owed several thousand dollars. How do these amounts provide additional meaning to the point Jesus makes in the parable?
5. Have you ever been in the position of the “fellow servants” in 18:31 (those who were outraged at how the servant with the small debt was treated by the servant whose large debt had just been forgiven)? What happened, and what did you do? What did you learn from that experience? How does that learning affect the way you understand what today’s text means?
6. *“Cancellation of debts is pure grace, but it is grace that transforms, creates love and relationship, and requires — even demands — a response.”* With this statement in mind, what stands out to you about the woman’s response to Jesus in Luke 7:37-50? How does her response demonstrate her knowledge of the forgiveness she has received?
7. With both parables in view, how would you describe the responsibility that comes with the grace we have received from God?
 - What does it look like to respond and act with the knowledge of what God has done for us?
 - In other words, how is your personal experience of God’s mercy shaping your desire and your ability to forgive others?