

THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL STORIES and SIGNS

JESUS THE STORYTELLER

The Unmerciful Servant

As we continue our study of the parables of Jesus, today's parable reminds us that Jesus told short stories with tall orders! The focus of the parable of The Unmerciful Servant is forgiveness. It might help if we begin by understanding what forgiveness is NOT.

- Forgiveness is not a feeling.
- Forgiveness is not pretending you weren't hurt.
- Forgiveness is not saying what the person did was okay.
- Forgiveness does not mean you have to trust someone again.
- Forgiveness is not relieving other people of their responsibility.

Human forgiveness has been defined as the act of consciously deciding to let go of resentment or vengeance toward another person who has harmed you in some way whether or not that person is actually deserving of your forgiveness.

Regarding our forgiveness of those who harm us, let's get real. If someone has deeply hurt us, forgiveness most likely is not the first thing to pop up on our 'radar'. We live in a world where the 'revenge' mentality rules. We believe Satan's lie that revenge is sweet. And we cannot help but question at times how in the world can we forgive someone who has hurt us deeply? Sometimes we forgive a person once but forgiving a second or third time for the same offense makes our forgiveness more difficult. It is not a 'new' question. In fact, how often to forgive someone is the question Peter brought up with Jesus.

How much forgiveness is required of a Christian?

Read Matthew 18:21-22 (ESV) ²¹ Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" ²² Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, Jesus made it clear that a forgiving spirit is vital to the believer's walk of faith and prayer life. Jesus told them to pray: *forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.* (**Matthew 6:12**) Jesus was not teaching in the model prayer or in today's parable that believers earn God's forgiveness by forgiving others. That would be a salvation by works when the Bible plainly says in **Ephesians 2:8-9 (ESV)** ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

However, we should never forget that if we have truly experienced God's forgiveness, then we should have a forgiving heart. **Ephesians 4:32 (ESV)** ³² *Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.* Forgiveness begins with a decision of personal surrender. This surrender invites God to begin working in our lives in a deeper level, allowing God to heal us. Even modern medical professionals know that forgiveness is an essential part of a healthy lifestyle.

Peter did not ask Jesus whether we should forgive or not. Peter already understood that forgiveness is essential in life. However, Peter thought seven times (seven being considered a perfect number by the Jews) would be more than enough forgiveness. If we are honest, most of us would agree with Peter. According to the Jewish Talmud, forgiving three times was all that was required. If you check different biblical translations, you will notice that the number of times Jesus gave for forgiveness varies. The KJV, for example, reads *seventy times seven* which would be 490 times while the ESV and other translations show the number as 77 times. The reason for this difference is when the scripture was written in Greek, a mathematical notation was used that could be interpreted in two different ways. This may have been intentional on the part of Jesus to emphasize that numbers are not important. Keeping score of wrongs up to 77 times or 490 times would be ridiculous. Jesus was explaining to Peter that the believer's forgiveness should be unlimited because we have been forgiven an even greater debt. For an example, Jesus related a short story of the unmerciful servant.

In your relationships with others, remember as Christians, we have received forgiveness.

Read Matthew 18:23-27 (ESV) ²³ *“Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. ²⁵ And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.*

John the Baptist had said in **Matthew 3:2 (ESV)** ² *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”* The kingdom of heaven or kingdom of God was the central theme of Jesus' teaching. The kingdom that Jesus spoke about was NOT a geographical location, or a political party or nation; or even a group of people such as the church. His kingdom is the rule of God over human lives when Jesus reigns in the hearts of His children now while we await the return of our King Jesus.

Jesus used hyperbole to make his points. Hyperbole is a figure of speech in which statements are exaggerated to make a point but is rarely meant to be taken literally. In terms of today's buying power, what the servant owed would have been the equivalent of over \$10 million. A servant in biblical times would never have owed that amount of money unless he was stealing. In Jesus' story, there came a time of accounting between the servant and king. The king was about to order the servant and his family to be sold to pay the debt when the servant

dropped to His knees and begged promising he would repay what he owed. His case was hopeless, except for one thing: The king was a man of compassion. He assumed the loss and forgave the servant.

This meant that the man was free and that he and his family would not be thrown into a debtor's prison. The servant did not deserve this forgiveness; it was purely an act of love and mercy on the part of the master.

As Christians we should be concerned how others see us because it is really hard to see Jesus in the life of a person who harbors an unforgiving spirit. On the other hand, it is very easy to see Jesus in the life of a forgiving person. That is why the king in the story reminds us of our Almighty God and how He freely forgives all things when we ask for forgiveness. Jesus said *Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.* (**Matthew 5:7**)

Let's make it a point to never be a forgiven person who withholds forgiveness from others. As Christians, we must extend forgiveness.

Read Matthew 18:28-35 (ESV) ²⁸ *But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.'* ²⁹ *So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.'* ³⁰ *He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.* ³¹ *When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place.* ³² *Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.'* ³³ *And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?'* ³⁴ *And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.* ³⁵ *So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."*

Here is an identical plea of forgiveness being made although the debt was much smaller. The denarius was probably worth a typical day's wage; therefore, the second debt would not have been insurmountable. When the forgiven debtor approached his fellow servant, he did not model the actions of his master. Instead he had his debtor vengefully thrown into prison. In prison, the debtor would have no opportunity to earn money to repay the debt unless a friend or family member stepped in with assistance and that is exactly what happened.

The friends did not attempt to pay the debt. They probably couldn't afford to pay it anyway. They did something better. They approached the master with the problem on their friend's behalf. This reminds us what we can do when we find our friends and family to be in desperate circumstances. **Hebrews 4:16 (ESV)** ¹⁶ *Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.* Our Master's door is open! We can go directly to the throne room of God for ourselves or for others!

The master called the servant *wicked*. In the eyes of God, an unforgiving spirit is wicked. A person who has been forgiven should be forgiving. Jesus ended His parable with a warning. In the story, the person who had been forgiven much was not himself forgiving to others and because of his unforgiving spirit, he became a prisoner.

Everyone of us has experienced times of needing to forgive someone – sometimes the infractions may be small – other times, they may be huge. Then, there are the times – when we are the one in need of forgiveness. No matter what has happened to you in the past or what you have done to others, it is God’s desire that your past does not affect your present or your future.

Joel 2:25 (ESV) ²⁵ *I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent among you.* You ask, “What in the world does this scripture have to do with forgiveness?” This is a word of promise to all who return to the Lord with sincere and broken hearts.”You cannot have back your time,” said Charles Spurgeon, “but there is a strange and wonderful way in which God can give back to you the wasted blessings, the unripened fruits of years over which you mourned.... It is a pity that they should have been locust-eaten by your folly and negligence; but if they have been so, be not hopeless concerning them.”

Don’t become a prisoner to an unforgiving spirit and live in an existence of continual torture. That is why we need to remind ourselves often of the tall order that Jesus gave in this short story of the unmerciful servant. Having a forgiving heart is the key to our freedom!

In some situations, we may find it easier to forgive others than to forgive ourselves. The Lord does not want His children living a life of guilt. **Psalm 103:12 (ESV)** ¹² *as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.*

When you’ve asked the Lord’s forgiveness – when you’ve done your best to forgive others and done your best to have them forgive you, let go of the guilt. Our days are so precious – time is so short. There are so many verses in God’s Word about rejoicing in the Lord. It is hard to settle on one but I will! **Psalm 118:24 (ESV)** ²⁴ *This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

We all can think of sins that seem unforgivable. However, in the eyes of God, the only sin that is unforgivable is rejection of His Son, Jesus Christ as Savior. Just as not everyone accepts Jesus, not everyone who wrongs us will be repentant. It is difficult to reconcile with someone who does not want to reconcile with us but that should not erase our own forgiving spirit. Sometimes in life we encounter situations where reconciliation with wrongdoers would be very unwise. We all can think of our own examples. Nevertheless, this does not erase our need for a forgiving heart.

The wicked servant revealed his true heart when it came time to deal with his brother. One very accurate way to recognize a Christian is by the ‘fruit’ he or she bears. A forgiving spirit is a beautiful reflection of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Do not dwell in the prison of an unforgiving heart. And the saddest part about such a prison is that it is a prison of our own making. So, make it your business to forgive early and forgive often.