

“The Merciful Master”

The servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. (Matt. 18:25-27).

“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.” These are the final words in today’s Gospel reading, and they constitute a frightening warning from Jesus. These condemning words are the conclusion of a response to Peter’s question about the limits of forgiveness in which he asked, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?” His question seems simple enough and, truth be told, it’s a question we’ve all considered. When is enough, enough? How many times do I have to forgive someone before I can cut them off?

And in answer to Peter’s question, Jesus told a parable about, “a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. (And) When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.” It’s hard to make a contemporary comparison to the amount of money this man owed to the king, but we know that the term “talent” was equal to the wages a laborer would earn over roughly twenty years. Take a second to think about that. One talent equaled twenty years of work! And this man owed the king ten thousand talents!!! Jesus had just described a man who owed the king an utterly impossible debt. There was simply no way it could ever be repaid, and in the next sentence the terrible implications of the man’s impossible obligation show how serious his situation was. Jesus continued, “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” (Matthew 18:24-25). As hard as it is for us to comprehend the astronomical level of this man’s debt, the punishment for his failure to pay what he owed is heartbreaking and hard to imagine. Because of this man’s debt to the master, he was about to lose everything – his possessions, his wife and children, and, for all intents and purposes, his life itself. His situation was beyond desperate and he knew it.

Remember, this is a parable through which Jesus was illustrating truth about the kingdom of heaven, and one of the most important lessons in this parable deals with the seriousness of our debt to God and our complete inability to pay it back. This point is essential to today’s text, because the inability to reimburse the Master is something we don’t naturally understand. In fact, just like the man in the story, we all live under the illusion that we can actually make-up for what we’ve done. That somehow if we do enough good stuff we can make restitution for our wrongs and redeem ourselves from the consequences of our sins. And this natural inclination is not lost on Jesus. Remember, as he described the man’s harrowing situation Jesus says, “Since he could not pay...” He doesn’t say the man was unwilling to work it off. In fact, with so much on the line the condemned man would’ve done whatever the Master asked of him. But that’s not the way it works, and Jesus wants us to understand that the debt we have incurred by our own sin is impossible for us to pay off, and our attempts at self-redemption only make matters worse.

The punishment of a debtor’s prison seems harsh and inhumane, but the punishment for sin described in Scripture goes much further. The payment for sin is total separation from God! It is an eternal and isolated existence that makes the walls of a debtor’s prison seem lenient by comparison. And as impossible as the debt in the parable was, the debt to which we are obligated is even greater. We have broken God’s law, we have sinned against Him and against our neighbor, and there is absolutely nothing we can do to make it up. We cannot pay it back and we cannot work it off. We are at the mercy of a perfectly righteous and all-powerful God...*and that is exactly where we need to be!*

You see, in the mercy of the Master, our debt has been cancelled. Jesus uses this parable to teach us many lessons about the kingdom of heaven, but none more important than this. Our debt is great, but His mercy is greater. Our sinfulness is pervasive, but His forgiveness is absolute. We are unable to pay for what we've done, but He was able to make payment, and on the Cross, in the person of Jesus Christ, God experienced the separation and isolation that we deserve. He took the punishment that we have earned and because of this complete and perfect payment we have been redeemed. We have been bought back. Our debt has been cancelled, our sin has been forgiven, and to use Jesus' own words, the undeserved mercy of the Master is the thing to which "the kingdom of heaven may be compared!"

God's forgiveness frees us from the bondage of our sin. It restores us to a relationship with God that is not based on fear, but on gratitude, and in the same free and gracious way we have been forgiven, we have also been given the call and power to forgive others. Today's Gospel reading opens with a simple question from Peter, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?" (Matthew 18:21). From all we know, Peter's question was an honest one. Just a few verses prior to his question Jesus had told His disciples, and specifically Peter, that they had the authority to forgive sins. Not only that, but Jesus also told them that, "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven" (Matthew 16:19). So, with eternal stakes hanging the balance, Peter wanted to be sure he understood this whole forgiveness thing, because Peter knew all about the human tendency to commit a sin and be forgiven, and then commit the same sin all over again. So, Peter is basically saying, "Lord, you've told us that we are going to restore and forgive people, but then they are going to go out and do it again...or they're going to do something worse. So how many times do we keep forgiving them? Does forgiveness have a limit? When is enough forgiveness enough?"

In answer to his own question Peter then suggested a guideline: "Is seven times enough?" And I'm sure Peter considered this to be a very gracious answer. In fact, many of the Jewish rabbis of the day taught that you were only obligated to forgive a person three times, so when Peter suggested forgiving seven times he was being lavish. In fact, he had more than doubled the Jewish guidelines for forgiveness and, as any one of us might do, he probably expected a little praise for his generosity.

And in response to this very human and very law-based question from Peter, Jesus responded with a parable that seems to convey its own question: "How much has the Master forgiven you?" And today, this is a question we need to hear and must consider as well. You see, the job of the church is not preventing sin, and it goes without saying that the church is not in the business of paying for sin. First and foremost, we, the church, are in the business of forgiving sin, and as much as we might want to put limits on mercy and compassion, God promises us that, "when we confess our sins, He faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (I John 1:9). Always! Every time! Without exception!

The story in today's text is often called, "The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant." And while the judgment levied on the ungrateful and vindictive servant should absolutely get our attention, this is not the main point of the story. Today, you have heard the parable of "The Merciful Master" and today, as you consider your sin, and as you struggle with the burden of guilt that we all bear, you have heard the assuring Word of Christ that your sins have been punished, and in the light of the atoning work of Jesus Christ, the Master has cancelled your debt and welcomed you into His kingdom. And now, because of this unfathomable gift of grace you and I can forgive our brother or sister and we can do it from the heart.

That is the work to which God has called His Church, and as we carry God's grace into our lives we are called to share in our words and show in our actions the same forgiveness that Christ died to bring us. And my friends, as we do the job of the church, the Merciful Master is at work in the world and in us. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today. And all God's people said, "Amen."

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