

Today we're kicking off our Summer series on the Parables. Jesus regularly used parables because they can convey a message in ways that direct instruction can't. A parable is effective because "...it is compellingly interesting, and in being interesting it diverts attention and disarms. A parable's ultimate aim is to awaken insight, stimulate the conscience, *and* move to action."¹ As we walk through the series, this is exactly what you'll see Jesus doing. So, what is a parable? Scholar, Klyne Snodgrass, offers a simple definition that I think will be helpful for us as we gather each week. He says, "...a parable is an expanded analogy used to convince and persuade."² Every week, as we explore a new parable, we'll see Jesus shocking His listeners into seeing things in a whole, new way and moving them to do something about it.

To prepare us for today's text in Matthew 18, I want to share an excerpt from the autobiography of Corrie ten Boom. She was a Dutch woman who helped save many Jewish people from the Nazis during WWII and, ultimately ended up in a concentration camp.³

It was in a church in Munich where I was speaking in 1947 that I saw him - a balding heavysset man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat, the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones.

Memories of the concentration camp came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of

¹ Snodgrass, Klyne R. *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2008), 8.

² Ibid, 9.

³ "Corrie ten Boom on Forgiveness," *Guideposts*, www.guideposts.org/positive-living/guideposts-classics-corrie-ten-boom-forgiveness. Accessed June 10, 2024.

dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment of skin.

Betsie and I had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland. This man had been a guard at Ravensbruck concentration camp where we were sent.

Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: "A fine message, fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!"

It was the first time since my release that I had been face to face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

"You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk," he was saying. "I was a guard there. But since that time," he went on, "I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein" - again the hand came out - "will you forgive me?"

And I stood there - and could not. Betsie had died in that place - could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?

Look at Matthew 18:23-35 and follow along as I read...[READ]

"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. 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 [*torturers*], 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."

Incalculable Debt (v 23-27)

Earlier in Matthew 18, the topic of forgiveness came up; how to handle when someone sins against you, how many times one should forgive. This parable is *not* an illustration of the earlier forgiveness discussions, but another *spotlight* on forgiveness and the *necessity* of forgiveness for those who are part of the Kingdom of God. [This parable focuses on the necessity of forgiveness for those who are in God's Kingdom.]

So, here's the breakdown: A king is ready to settle accounts with those who serve him. The slaves or servants described are more likely top-of-the-heap managers of large segments of the king's assets, not just menial task doers. Some scholars believe that this servant was a 'tax manager'—basically charged with collecting taxes for the king in a particular region. Now, here's where it gets crazy.

Somehow, that servant owed the king 10,000 talents. A talent was about 20 years' wages for a laborer at the time. In Greek culture, a talent was the largest known amount of money. There was nothing larger than a talent. And 10,000 was the largest number used by the Greeks.⁴ So, what we see is a servant who owed a ridiculous amount of money. To us today, if we were to loosely calculate the values based on what a McDonald's employee currently makes per hour, the servant owed the king more than \$8B. To the listener at the time, Jesus' words described the hugest amount of money conceivable. For us it's like saying, the servant owed

⁴ France, R.T. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2007), 706.

the king a Zillion dollars. How long would it take to pay that back? The math brains in the room already did the calculations. But for those who didn't, here it is: 1 talent was 20 years' wages. 10,000 talents equals 200,000 years' wages. Are you getting the picture? The amount of money Jesus is describing is intended to be hyperbole—exaggerated to make a very specific point: there was no way the servant could ever repay the debt he owed the king. It couldn't be done.

Initially, since the servant couldn't repay the debt, the king wanted to sell him, his family and all he owed, and put money gained toward the debt. Clearly, that wouldn't be enough to cover it, and it would cost the servant and his family everything. But the servant begged the king for an opportunity to work off the debt, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you *everything*.' Everything? Really? You have a couple hundred thousand years I don't know about? Again, there's *no way*. Which is what makes the king's response so overwhelming. The text says the king took pity on him; the word describes compassion in motion. The king's heart was moved to forgive the servant's debt completely.

If you've been forgiven...

Raise your hand if you'd be thrilled to have that kind of debt forgiven. [Hands] If you've received the forgiveness of God for your sin, then you *have* been forgiven a ridiculous debt. Our sin put us so far in debt that we could never dig our way out. Romans 3 says everyone has sinned. Romans 6 says that what we earn for our sin is death—eternal separation from God. On our own, we have no hope. We have a debt that we can't pay; no matter how much time we've got. But Jesus, in His great mercy and grace, paid your/my debt through His death on the cross. When you trust Jesus as your Leader and Forgiver, His sacrifice covers your debt. He took the death penalty in your place. He paid a debt He did not owe. The King of Heaven forgave you. Like the servant in this parable, you have been forgiven an incalculable debt!

Sometimes we forget just how far God went to forgive us. We think we're not *that bad*—it's not like I'm a murderer or human trafficker or something.

But, in the eyes of a holy God, lies, murder, lust, gaslighting, and trafficking are all the same: repugnantly offensive. If you've trusted Jesus, you/I have been forgiven a debt you/I could never repay.

The Servant's Response (v 28-30)

We aren't told what went on in the heart and mind of the servant when the king forgave him, all we see are his actions. Was he leaving the king's presence when he happened upon the fellow servant? Maybe. But the language suggests that he went searching, hunting, for the servant that owed him money. He knew his rights and he was going to collect.

It was perfectly legal for the first servant to want his money, even to demand it by sending the other to jail. But clearly something is wrong with this guy, right? Clearly, he doesn't realize how much *he's* been forgiven! This guy was released from a debt that couldn't be repaid in 2000 lifetimes, and this is how he responds!

Jesus gives us just enough info to highlight the absurdity of the unmerciful servant's actions. The fellow servant owes him, roughly, 4-5 months' wages. In today's math, maybe \$16,000. I would have loved to be in the crowd as Jesus told this part of the story. Can you imagine the gasps of disbelief from the people? Servant #1 owed \$8 billion. Servant #2 owes \$16 thousand, and servant #1 [the servant] has no intention of extending grace or mercy to a fellow debtor. Even though the fellow servant begs, using almost the exact same words as the first servant, he is unmoved as he chokes the fellow servant. He knows his rights. He knows what he's owed. It's all perfectly legal. The king's mercy didn't change him at all.

Considering Forgiveness

Raise your hand if you've ever been sinned against (in big or small ways). [Hands] Keep your hand up if you haven't yet forgiven someone who sinned against you. [If hands go down quickly...tease gently about that] Forgiveness is hard for us. We know we've been wronged. We know we've been cheated, stolen from, abused and dreadfully mistreated. The

scars from the sins against us are still tender, sometimes still raw, and forgiveness doesn't *feel* like an option.

Last year, at men's retreat, Dr. Michael Ballard spoke to us about forgiveness. He even used this text throughout the weekend. He shared some things with us that I want to share with you about forgiveness. Hopefully, this will be as helpful to you as it was to the men that weekend.

First, Dr. Ballard shared that forgiveness is releasing the demand for justice to God. It's releasing the need for payback. Romans 12 says, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'"⁵ Forgiveness is not minimizing the sin against you. It's not denying the hurt or anger that you feel. It's releasing the requirement for payback to God. Next, forgiveness does not depend on the other person's request. Waiting for them just keeps you stuck. You can forgive without the offending person seeking forgiveness and without even speaking to the other person (which is good because sometimes the person we need to forgive is dead or is so toxic that interaction wouldn't be healthy or wise). He also reminded us that forgiveness does not mean forgetting or that what happened doesn't matter. And that forgiveness is not synonymous with reconciliation—restored relationship. It can *lead* to reconciliation, which is ideal, but not always.

I know I can't address this thoroughly today. This is stuff that's usually done over time with Jesus, a helpful book and often with a Christian friend or therapist. I don't want this to replace those things. I just want to give you some things to truly consider as we step further into the parable. I've included in your notes a book that Dr. Ballard recommended that deals directly with forgiving and reconciling.⁶ That could be a good resource for you in your forgiveness journey.

⁵ Romans 12: 19-21. See also Deuteronomy 32:35 and Proverbs 25:21-22 as cited from 19:19 & 20.

⁶ Worthington, Everett L. *Forgiving and Reconciling: Bridges to Wholeness and Hope* (Recommended by Dr. Michael Ballard at Men's Retreat, 2023) Here's the link for the book: <https://a.co/d/5M9o78v>

Here's what he really challenged us to wrap our heads and hearts around at retreat: unforgiveness only hurts us—the already wounded. When you refuse to forgive, you are the one that pays the penalty. The person who has sinned against you, who has hurt you, is going on their merry way not worried about it at all—but you're tied up in knots, imprisoned because the sin committed against you is a big deal and you can't let it go! And Ballard said that the debt of sin against you will be paid in one of two ways: either by eternity in Hell or by the death of Christ on the cross. John Piper expanded on this beautifully in message called *How to Battle Bitterness*. He said, "God will lift from you the suicidal load of vengeance and carry it to one of two places. He will carry it to the cross if the person repents, or he will carry it to hell where they will be forever. And you can't improve upon either of those. If they're in hell, you don't need to add to their punishment. If their load was borne and forgiven and paid at the cross, you would dishonor the Lord if you didn't share in the forgiveness."⁷

We don't need revenge or payback or justice. God promises to take care of it because He holy and He is just. When we choose to forgive, we're agreeing with God by saying, "You've got this. You'll handle this person better than I ever could—with perfect righteousness and justice." And, at the same time, our failure to forgive suggests that we don't believe that either the cross or Hell are enough, and that God can't handle it. Forgiveness frees you. It breaks the chain that keeps you bound to the person who's hurt you. It opens the door of the prison you've locked yourself in, and it sets *you* free. God will deal with them perfectly. You don't need to worry about it.

Outraged (v 31-34)

⁷ "How to Battle Bitterness," *DesiringGod.org*, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-word-of-god-is-at-work-in-you/excerpts/how-to-battle-bitterness>. Accessed June 8, 2024.

So, the unmerciful servant throws his fellow servant into debtor's prison. Those prisons had torturers,⁸ which means the unmerciful servant not only failed to forgive as he'd been forgiven, but pushed it far in the other direction making sure the fellow servant not only went to jail, but was tortured for his inability to repay his debt. And the other servants came unglued. 'How can he do this? He just got forgiven the greatest debt anyone has ever known! How could he possibly be so hardhearted and uncaring toward someone who owes him so little?'

The servants were shocked by the gap between the treatment he received and the treatment he gave. So they went to the king, their master, and they shared their shock. The king pulls him in and calls out his wickedness. 'I forgave you *billions*, and you won't forgive something miniscule by comparison?' Again, for the numbers people listening, the second servant owed about 1/500,000th of what the first servant owed. Clearly, the first guy had not been transformed by the grace and mercy of the king. Instead, his true wickedness was revealed, so he was handed over to be tortured ('jailers' is not really the word; it's torturers.) Because he was unwilling to forgive, his debt was back on his shoulders.

From the Heart (v 35)

And Jesus wraps it up with, "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother *from your heart*." This is an ideal time to remember that this is a parable. This is not a mathematical equation where *this equals that*. God does not have torturers. This is *not* pointing to purgatory or a doctrine that you can lose your salvation. Those are inconsistent with the rest of scripture. But think about it for just a moment: when you will *not* forgive, who's being punished? You! You are bearing the weight of your unforgiveness. You're the one imprisoned. Your unforgiveness does nothing to the other person, but it wrecks you. God's forgiveness freed you and your heart-felt forgiveness of others enables you to continue to enjoy your freedom.

⁸ Blomberg, Craig L. *Interpreting the Parables, Second Edition* (Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, 2012), 318.

⁹ Snodgrass, 72.

Since you've been forgiven, since you've received the mercy and grace of God, since your debt is cancelled, you have the privilege of extending grace and mercy to those who owe you by cancelling *their* debt. You get to be like your King! Here's the bottom line: Forgiven people forgive others. Hold onto that, friends. Forgiveness is a decision. You don't try, you decide. There's no other way around it. If you've received God's grace and mercy, then it's transforming you, conforming you to *His* likeness. I know it's not easy. I'm not saying it is. But He's called you to it, so trust Him. You may need to forgive repeatedly. You may need to let it go over and over again. You may find yourself wanting your justice, and when that happens, forgive again. He will handle the offender perfectly.

And, if you're not willing to forgive, then you may have forgotten how much He has forgiven you. I'm not trying to sound condemning with those words, but if Jesus says, "forgive" and you won't, there's a problem. I would encourage you to press in and ask, 'Have I truly received God's grace and mercy? Am I living in freedom because all my sin is forgiven?' Our willingness to forgive is an overflow response of gratitude to the Father for all He has forgiven us! And "where forgiveness is not extended, people will be held accountable."¹⁰ That's what Jesus is saying. I don't know what that looks like. It definitely hinders relationship with the Lord. Maybe it's allowing us to experience the pain that comes with unforgiveness. Maybe it's a discipline that comes in another form. I don't know. I do know that in Matthew 6 Jesus said, "For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." So, there is a tie between being forgiven by God for our daily failures and faults and the forgiveness we extend to others. Those who belong to the Kingdom of Heaven are willing to forgive like God forgives: from the heart and genuinely. "The key to forgiveness is to

¹⁰ Ibid, 75.

stop focusing on what others have done *to* us and focus on what Jesus has done *for* us.”¹¹

Closing with Corrie (back to Corrie ten Boom)

It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

For I had to do it - I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. “If you do not forgive men their trespasses,” Jesus says, “neither will your Father in Heaven forgive your trespasses.”

Still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. “Jesus, help me!” I prayed silently. “I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.”

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

“I forgive you, brother!” I cried. “With all my heart!”

For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely as I did then.

Wrap

As people of God, we have been forgiven a ridiculous debt; a ‘zillion dollar’ debt. And, as people on the receiving end of God’s grace and mercy, we have been called (and empowered) to extend forgiveness. Yes,

¹¹ Wilkins, Michael J. *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2004), 639. Kindle Edition.

we have our rights, and our sense of justice and an internal desire to exact our pound of flesh. But, as children of the Kingdom, we must be willing to forgive just as freely from the heart as we have been forgiven. To do so points a watching world to the Father, the *source* of forgiveness. And our extensions of mercy and grace underscore that we do, indeed, belong in the Kingdom. Forgiven people forgive others. That's how things work for those in the Kingdom of Heaven.