

Matthew 18:21-35
The Core of the Kingdom: Mercy
Sunday August 14th, 2022



Gustav Dore

We look at Adam and Eve being cast out of the garden as punishment, and in many ways it was. But it was God's first act of mercy. Had humanity continued to exist in the garden they would have had access to the tree of life while also living under the curse of sin.

From Genesis 3:22-24, "And the LORD God said, 'The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat and live forever.' So, the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life."

X slide off

We rarely look at the expulsion from the Garden as mercy because our hearts still long for Eden, for Paradise, but an eternity separated from God due to our sinful state, would have meant the ache we feel for paradise would have never been soothed.

The flaming sword meant each of us would live a lifetime in a world full of suffering because of the effects of the fall. But it kept us from an eternally living in this sinful state suffering all the effects of sin in our earthly bodies. The expulsion, by keeping us from the tree of life, saved us from a living hell here on earth separated from God and never able to truly inherit eternal life in heaven.

It was the beginning of the path that would lead to Jesus' conquering sacrifice that provided access to an eternity with God in Paradise.

Mercy, do we know it? Do we practice it? Do we withhold it from others? Mercy's source is God. Do our lives display it. Mercy is the core of the Kingdom of God.

Luke 17:20-21 states, "Now having been questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God was coming, He answered them and said, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or, 'There it is!' For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst."

The Kingdom of God is indeed in our midst when we practice mercy or forgiveness with one another. It is an attitude within our heart that has outward consequences that positively affect others. The Pharisees were looking for signs of the end times. They were looking for dramatic signs of the coming of the Kingdom at the end of time.

X slide off

Jesus was telling them, and us, that when we practice the core attitudes of the heart of the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom is here, now in our midst in our hearts and lived out in our lives.

Now I want to explain this parable in its original setting to deepen your understanding of its meaning and message.

It was originally engendered by Peter's comment and question about how many times to forgive a member of the church. Peter's thought was he was being generous if he forgave someone 7 times, because that was twice what the Rabbis taught you had to forgive someone (3 times), plus one. Jesus' response was not just 7 times, but 77 times.

There has been lots of speculation as to what these numbers mean, but the gist of Jesus' teaching was if you are counting the number

of times, you have forgiven someone then you really haven't forgiven them; you are just biding your time for revenge.

Peter probably also thought his offer was generous, because there was no reference to repentance, or reconciliation being needed by the offender, but he still was counting.

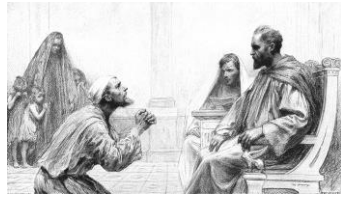
Now if someone thinks that vengeance and hatred and grudges are sweet; and believes that despite holding these they are eligible to enter the Kingdom of God, this parable is actually a scary, troubling, and very disturbing.

In this parable the King is God. 10,000 was the largest numerical designation in use at the time. A talent was the largest monetary unit in use at the time. So, Jesus was saying the largest amount of money that could be conceived of was owed by this slave/servant. A talent was worth 15 years wages, so in essence this slave owed 150,000 years' worth of wages. The debt this slave owed was unpayable by anyone in any lifetime. The entire kingdom of Herod in Jesus' day only produced about 900 talents a year.

Now this slave/servant was not just a house slave. He was understood as being the ruler of one of the King's fiefdoms. He owed all of his allegiance and all of his income to the King. His great debt showed he was criminally incompetent with the King's money. It's obvious why he's called the "Unmerciful Servant" but I want to go into it anyway.

When the King called him to account the slave simply asked for more time to pay his debt. The king knew that debt was unpayable; so instead of granting him more time, he gave him what he needed most, and that was forgiveness of all of his debt. **He gave him mercy.**

He is called the "Unmerciful Servant" and this parable is called the parable of the "Unmerciful Servant," because even though he was forgiven an unpayable debt; he did not extend that mercy to the 2nd slave/servant we come across in our parable who owed only 100 denarii. **X Slide off**



Eugene Burnand

100 denarii was 3 months wages. It was a payable debt. The 2nd servant even though he appealed to the “Unmerciful Servant” in the same exact words that the Unmerciful Servant used he did not receive mercy. He was brutalized and jailed. He was thrown in debtor’s prison.



Eugene Burnand

The result of the Unmerciful Servant’s lack of mercy was that his debt was reinstated. He himself was handed over to the torturers until he could pay his entire debt, which would be never, for the amount was too large.

X Slide off

Now how does this understanding apply to us?

Mercy and forgiveness is a core theme of Jesus throughout his teaching ministry here on earth. It is a core characteristic of God from the story of the Garden of Eden forward. And the mercy and forgiveness we extend to others is tied to the mercy and forgiveness we receive from God. I would submit, in fact to you, that mercy is the purpose of Jesus’ life, teaching, death and resurrection.

Let’s look at mercy from the beginning of Jesus’ ministry here on earth to his Crucifixion.

In Matthew 5:7 Jesus said, **“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”**

The Lord’s Prayer in our bulletin today says, **“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors”** for mercy and forgiveness are most often the same. One of the reasons I used this version of the Lord’s Prayer is that it uses the words “debt” and “debtors” instead of trespasses and so links it better to our parable today.

X Slide off

When we sin, we create a debt that must be paid or forgiven through the mercy of God. Even though we may sin against one another, the One we ultimately sin against is God. As David said in the Psalm 51, **“Against you, you only I have sinned.”** It is to God we owe the debt of our sin, and it is an unpayable debt.

And Jesus’ words, immediately following the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 5:14-15, drives home the point; that the forgiveness of our sins is dependent on our forgiveness of those who sin against us. **“For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. “But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.”**

James 2:13 says, **“Judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.”**



In the depictions of the birth of Jesus with the star above the Nativity scene the star is often in the form of a cross; so that from the beginning to the end of Jesus’ ministry here on earth we are reminded that God sent him to grant us mercy by paying the debt of our sin.

X Slide off

It is his core purpose. It is the purpose of the cross. For us to deny someone else mercy is to deny the very reason for Christ’s suffering death and resurrection.

Romans 5:6-9 state, **“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—**

though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

For us to be unmerciful/unforgiving is to reject the core purpose and reason for Jesus Christ's sacrifice. He paid our unpayable debt for our sin with his own flesh and blood. He paid for your sin, my sin through his death on the cross. He has forgiven so much. He is so merciful towards us. He through this parable tells us to be as merciful towards others. Can you? Won't you? It's hard but so important to do.

X Slide off

Now this parable of the Unmerciful Servant is from the same chapter of Matthew that tells us how to work with upsets in the church. In fact, it is explicit here that the teaching of this parable has to do with the relationships between members in the church. Verse 21 says, **"Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?"**

An unforgiving heart hurts you and Christ's Body the church. I want to say that if you hold grudges and resentments and an unforgiving heart it hurts you. This is a statement from Rev. Pat Umberger called "Resent Somebody" which pretty much sums things up.

He wrote, *"The moment you start to resent a person you become their slave. They control your dreams, absorb your digestion, rob you of peace of mind and good will, and take away the pleasure of your work. They ruin your spirituality and nullify your prayers."*

You cannot take a vacation without them going along! They destroy your freedom of mind and hound you wherever you go. There is no way to escape the person you resent. They are with you when you are awake. They invade your privacy when you sleep. They are close beside you when you eat, when you drive your car, and when you are on the job.

X Slide off

You can never have efficiency or happiness. They influence even the tone of your voice. They require you to take medicine for indigestion, headaches, and loss of energy. They even steal your last moment of consciousness before you go to sleep.

So, if you want to be a slave, harbor your resentments."

Do you hold resentment, anger, a grudge against any person within or outside the Church? You are a slave to them!

Do you wonder if you offend God in this? If the other person is part of the Body of Christ, you do. You in effect are harboring resentment against Christ whose purpose in being was to die for that person's sin!

Can you then truly pray, **“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors”** and expect forgiveness if your heart is unforgiving and merciless toward another, especially one for whom Christ died to forgive?

Now I know here on earth some situations between people even in the church are unreconcilable this side of the Judgment day. I've been in those situations. I've done my best to lay my gift at the altar and make amends with someone I know has a beef with me, but they want to hold onto the anger and at times even hatred.

But God calls us to peace. Jesus gave us a way to deal with such times and people in Luke 10 when he says to the effect if someone doesn't accept you just shake of the dust of your sandals as a witness and move on. Move on forgive and forget. Leave them to the mercy of God. Forgiveness is often an action not a feeling. It is not acting to avenge or retaliate.

Christ died for you too. He lifted from your shoulders an unpayable debt. If you find it beyond your strength and power to forgive another, ask God to lift from you that burden! Ask to be bought back from that slavery.

But this parable cries out: for your sake, your forgiveness, your happiness and peace to extend mercy and forgiveness to another!



Take a look at the circle of repentance in our bulletins, if you are here today with anger, resentment or grudges against another this is your Kairos moment!!! God is calling you to enter the process of repentance and belief. Now is the time to observe that, reflect on it and later discuss it with a pastor or Stephen minister.

It is time to make a plan to ask for forgiveness, to extend mercy, to go to another and deal with them out of mercy, forgiveness, and love; and not resentment and grudges. Now is the time to believe. Now is the time to be held accountable to that and act and move to a higher level of the love of God and neighbor. And if reject God calls you to peace and to move on but God calls you to act first. Its hard and scary but will set you free.



Take a look at the bike wheel on the screen. Imagine the center hub is God. The spokes are our fellow Christians and people in this world.

As we grow closer to one another, we grow closer to God. As we grow closer to God, we grow closer to one another.

If we act towards one another with mercy and forgiveness we will grow closer to each other and God. If not God, stays remote.

Now is the time of your salvation. Now is the time for you to repent and believe. Now is the time to extend mercy and forgiveness and receive it in return.

Now is the Kingdom of God. It is among us. It can be in your heart and evident in your life today. Won't you with Christ's power invite it in?

Amen.

Prayer of Christian repentance and belief.....