

The Forgiving Master & Unforgiving Servant

(Matthew 18:21-35)

(EHV) Then Peter came up and asked Jesus, “Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother when he sins against me? As many as seven times?” (22) Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but I tell you as many as seventy-seven times. (23) For this reason the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. (24) When he began to settle them, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. (25) Because the man was not able to pay the debt, his master ordered that he be sold, along with his wife, children, and all that he owned to repay the debt. (26) “Then the servant fell down on his knees in front of him, saying, ‘Master, be patient with me, and I will pay you everything!’ (27) The master of that servant had pity on him, released him, and forgave him the debt. (28) “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began choking him, saying, ‘Pay me what you owe!’ (29) “So his fellow servant fell down and begged him, saying, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back!’ (30) But he refused. Instead he went off and threw the man into prison until he could pay back what he owed. (31) “When his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were very distressed. They went and reported to their master everything that had taken place. (32) “Then his master called him in and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt when you begged me to. (33) Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had mercy on you?’ (34) His master was angry and handed him over to the jailers until he could pay back everything he owed. (35) “This is what my heavenly Father will also do to you unless each one of you forgives his brother from his heart.”

Context: The parable follows Jesus’ exhortation about dealing with a brother who has sinned against another. The point of that discussion is that we are to seek to gain our brother. Peter then asks the question, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?”

Source: No one has been sinned against more often than God. Yet God’s forgiveness is not based on our worthiness of forgiveness, but upon His own grace and mercy. The very purpose Jesus came into the world, even to those who did not receive Him, was to make payment for the sins of all people.

Audience: It would seem that this parable is spoken privately to the disciples (cf. 18:1). It is possible, though, that “disciples” refers to a broader group than just the twelve.

Culture: While the point of the parable is not hard to get, there are some cultural aspects that definitely add to the point that Jesus made by it. For example, while “ten thousand” makes us think in large terms, it’s the “talents” that becomes all the more impressive. A talent is a year’s wages. The servant in the parable therefore owed his master ten thousand years’ wages, or about \$450 million. In contrast, the other servant owed his fellow servant 100 denarii, or 100 days’ wages—roughly \$15,000.

Also, there is a difference in the way creditors dealt with delinquent debtors. If we fall behind on our debts, about the worst that can happen to us is the confiscation of our property. In Jesus' day, creditors could not only confiscate property, but also an individual, as well as his family. The debt would be considered paid only when the debtor, together with his family, had worked enough hours. If the first servant had four children plus himself and his wife and each were ascribed a denarius a day, it would still take them 750,000 days, or 2,055 years.

Response: The disciples don't respond to the parable, but Jesus gives this stern warning, "So My heavenly Father will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."

The question that this particular parable begs is, "On what basis, then, does our Father forgive us?" Many mistakenly jump to Jesus' comment on the parable and "prove" that forgiveness from God must therefore be earned. Yet, the master in the parable forgave completely out of His own compassion. It wasn't until the servant dealt wickedly that the master withdrew his offer. The question that the master asked the servant becomes crucial for us: "Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?" It's not a question of earning God's forgiveness; it's a question of whether or not our Father's forgiveness has worked a change in our hearts. Forgiveness is received through faith and those who have faith are forgiving.

Questions

1. Where is Jesus in the parable and how does it describe Him? _____

2. What is the primary point of the parable? _____

3. With whom are we to associate ourselves in the parable? _____

4. How does faith in Christ reveal itself in the life of the Christian? _____

