

LET GO TO LET GO
Parable 6: The Merciless Servant
Sermon 6
Matthew 18: 21-35

I. ILLUSTRATION

EXAMPLE: FORGIVENESS THAT SEEMED IMPOSSIBLE
Paul Reed and Nguyen van Nghia

For SGT Paul Reed, like other Vietnam war veterans, the hardest part was coming home. After returning to civilian life in Texas in 1969, he went from one failed relationship and dead-end job to the next, his anger simmering and sometimes erupting in violence. If a stranger unexpectedly knocked on the door of the truck Reed drove for a living, 'I'd open it, and they'd be looking at a sawed-off shotgun," he says . . .

[After two broken marriages, a failed attempt to get a business degree, and frustration with life in general, in 1989] Reed was reaching his breaking point. It occurred, of all places, at the Texas State Fairgrounds in Dallas . . . during a Fourth of July celebration. Reed and a girlfriend happened upon an exhibit of granite slabs destined to become part of the Texas Vietnam Veterans Memorial. For the first time, he understood the source of his anger: the loss of his comrades and guilt over killing he had done in Vietnam. 'My heart just exploded,' says Reed, who sobbed for three hours.

For months he brooded over his wartime experiences. Then Polly [his mother], hoping to heal her son, removed [a] diary from a cabinet where it had lain for 20 years

Reed served with the 173 Airborne Brigade in Vietnam. He had found a diary belonging to 2 LT Nguyen van Nghia after a two-week battle in March, 1968 at Hill 1064, off the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the highlands of Kontum Province of South Vietnam. The diary, hidden by Nghia at a nearby campsite before the battle, included poems entitled *Memories*, about his love for family and homeland.

In 1993, Reed found Nghia, then 68, and returned the diary to him in his home village 7 miles south of Hanoi. Reed's reminiscences were compiled in a 1994 PBS documentary and a book in 1996 entitled *Kontum Diary*. They formed a friendship, and Reed arranged for Nghia to fly to the US for treatment at the VA hospital in Dallas. Nghia had an irreversible eye ailment and serious leakage in his aortic valve—afflictions probably due to injuries sustained in the war.

[Quotes from Nghia =] "We went to the war with just the will that we should reunite our country." "Look toward the future. That is the advice of our ancestors."

If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.

**— Henry Wadsworth
Longfellow (1857)**

II. BACKGROUND

1. FOURTH OF FIVE MAJOR DISCOURSES IN MATTHEW

- ❖ All but one end with a parable
 - **Mt 5-7**—Sermon on the Mount—two builders—rock and sand
 - **Mt 10**—Missionary Discourse—no parable
 - **Mt 13**—Kingdom of Heaven [8 parables]—householder brings out new/old treasure
 - **Mt 18**—The Church—ungrateful servant
 - **Mt 23-25**—End Times [Olivet]—sheep and goats

2. MATTHEW 18—CHURCH BEHAVIOR

- **vv1-5**—humility as a child—who will be great in the kingdom
- **vv6-9**—do not cause others to stumble
- **vv10-14**—recover the lost sheep
- **vv15-20**—church discipline—deal with sin in church
- **vv21-22**—how to forgive

3. BACK-STORY FOR THE PARABLE—**vv 15-20**

- a. Church discipline—accountability for sin—calls for **repentance**
- b. Jesus emphasizes need to recover brother—**redemptive** purpose
- c. Redemption required **forgiveness** from God—and the Church
- d. **Peter wondered**—how to do this—how often to forgive?
- e. **Peter’s solution**—forgive **seven** times
 - The rabbis had a kind and tolerant answer—forgive **three** times!
 - This was a generous outlook—in an ‘eye for eye’ world.
 - Think about this—that is a lot—more than most people do today!
 - Peter’s answer trumped the Pharisees—doubled them—plus one!
 - Did Peter expect Jesus to be pleased—and compliment him on his tolerance?

II. BIBLICAL TEXT—**Mt 18:21-35**

Mt 18:21-35—**21** *Then Peter came and said to Him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?”* **22** *Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.* **23** *“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. **24** When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. **25** But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. **26** So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.’ **27** And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. **28** But that slave*

went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ 29 So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you.’ 30 But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. 31 So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. 32 Then summoning him, his lord said to him, ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?’ 34 And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. 35 My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.”

III. CONTEXT

1. NO PARALLEL PARABLE
2. COMMON THREAD REITERATED—**GRACE**
 - a. Grace—as a theological concept—is not a primary focus of the Gospels
 - b. **Χαρις**—used only 9 times in Gospels—**Luke** (8 times) and **John** (one passage)
 - It does not mean ‘grace’ in Luke—only in **Jn 1:14-16**
 - c. But grace is a central theme in **five** of Jesus’ parables
 - Three Lostness parables—weeks 1-2
 - Two Debtors—last week
 - Ungrateful Servant—this week
3. ALSO—A COMMENTARY ON FOUR OTHER PASSAGES
 - a. **Beatitude**

Mt 5:7—*Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*
 - b. **Lord’s Prayer**
 - Really think about this—when recite it—do we do so with real meaning?

Mt 6:12, 14-15—*forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors . . . For if you forgive others for their sins, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your sins.*
 - c. **Sermon on the Plain**
 - ‘Love your enemies’ section ends this way

Lk 6:36—*Be merciful, just as our Father is merciful.*
 - d. **Cursed Fig Tree**
 - Jesus’ response emphasizes radical faith—then ends this way

Mk 11:25-26—*And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your sins.*

IV. PURPOSES OF PARABLE

A. THE PARABLE DOES THESE THINGS

1. CONFRONTS US WITH THE ENORMITY OF OUR DEBT TO GOD
2. REMINDS US WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR US—WE ARE FORGIVEN
3. URGES US TO FORGIVE OTHERS
4. TELLS US HOW TO FORGIVE—UNCONDITIONALLY
5. SHOWS US HOW TO IMITATE AND BE LIKE OUR FATHER

B. THE PARABLE DOES NOT

1. ENDORSE HUMAN METHODS—LIKE TORTURE—**v34**
 - A secular situation to give an analogy—do not transfer those standards literally
2. THREATEN THE LOSS OF OUR SALVATION—**v35**
 - Not about the end times—not about final judgment
 - But how God interacts with us here and now
 - It does not negate eternal security

VI. THE PARABLE

A. JESUS' SHOCKING ANSWER TO PETER

1. WHAT DID JESUS SAY?
 - a. Can be translated two ways
 - **70 times 7** = 490 times
 - **70 plus 7** = 77 times
 - b. If **77 times**—He could be countering the fear of vengeance

Gen 4:23-24—Lamech lamented after killing two persons—*If Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold.*
2. WHAT DID JESUS MEAN?
 - Our willingness to forgive should be **endless**—bottomless
3. SUCH AN OUTLOOK CAN LEAD TO AN ENORMOUS DEBT!

B. THE SERVANT OWED AN ASTRONOMICAL DEBT

1. **Value**
 - **1 talent** = 6000 denarii—20 years' wages

- o **Total debt** = 60 million denarii—200,000 years' wages
- o Today's cost = **\$12.3 billion**

2. Comparisons

- a. **Solomon** received 666 talents in one year—**II Chr 9:13**
 - 10,000 talents would pay 15 years for Solomon
- b. **Herod's** annual taxes for Palestine = 900 talents
 - 10,000 talents would pay national taxes for 11 years

3. Ironies

- o **Haman** promised to pay 10,000 talents for extermination of Jews—**Es 3:9**
- o **Pompey** extracted 10,000 talents from Jews after Roman conquest—63 BC

4. The point—his debt was unpayable

5. Contrasted—with what the other servant owed him

- a. 100 denarii = 4 months' pay
- b. Only 1/600,000th of what the rich debtor owed!
 - **Example—1-foot box compared to size of this sanctuary**
- c. It was **insignificant** by comparison
- d. But it still existed—was **noticeable**—and had to be dealt with—as does all sin!

C. THE GRACIOUS KING'S RESPONSE

1. Petitioner asked for two things

- o **Patience**—l-o-n-g-s-u-f-f-e-r-i-n-g
- o Permission to **repay** debt—restore the money

2. The king went *much further*—in three ways

- o **Had compassion** on him—felt sympathy—identified with him—not just tolerance
- o **Released** him = he set him free—even before the debt was forgiven
- o **Forgave** the debt = 'let go' of the obligation—with no requirement to repay

D. WICKED ACTIONS OF AN UNGRATEFUL SERVANT

1. HIS SERVANT MADE EXACTLY THE SAME PLEA

2. BUT HE RESPONDED WITH

a. Ingratitude

- He 'willed not'—willfully opposed mercy—purposefully uncompassionate
- His demand for payment—was his **legal** right
- But not in his **moral** power—because he had been a *worse* debtor

b. Mercilessness

- He did not **'let go'**—but **'grabbed'**—the man by the throat
- **Plaintiffs made their own arrests**
- **They grabbed debtors by the neck and dragged him to court**
- **'Choking the life out of a debtor'**—meant **taking him to court**

c. **Greed**

- He did not need the money—his debt was forgiven
- The amount was **trivial**—1/600,000th of his debt
- With 10,000 talents—he could have *bought* **48,000 servants** like this man

d. **Hypocrisy**

- He demanded from another—what he was unable to do himself

e. **Blind**

- Did not see his own sin—self-righteousness—like Simon the Pharisee—**Lk 7**

E. THE KING'S INDICTMENT

1. RESPONDED WITH OPPOSITE EMOTION—NOT COMPASSION—BUT ANGER
2. REVEALED SERVANT'S TRUE CHARACTER—'WICKED' = EVIL
3. CONSIGNED HIM TO PERMANENT BONDAGE—HE COULD NEVER REPAY DEBT
4. THE MORAL OBLIGATION OF FORGIVENESS
 - o Whoever has freely received—should freely give to others—"pass it on"
 - o If a king stoops to forgive a lowly subject—he should be willing to forgive his equal

V. MEANING

A. WE OWE GOD AN UNPAYABLE AND ASTRONOMICAL DEBT

1. ONLY GOD KNOWS THE FULL MAGNITUDE OF OUR SIN
 - o We do more than break the Law when we sin
 - o We break our relationship with Him—by shutting Him out
2. WE WILL REALIZE HOW GREAT ONLY WHEN CONFRONTED BY GOD'S GLORY
3. WE CANNOT DISREGARD THE INFINITE PRICE HE PAID TO REDEEM US
4. BY COMPARISON—OTHERS' DEBTS TO US ARE INSIGNIFICANT

B. GOD GRACIOUSLY FORGIVES US

1. HE IS NOT OBLIGED TO DO SO!
 - o Justice would be done—if we were fully punished for all our sins
 - o God may choose to forgive—or not—but it is not required of Him

Ex 33:19—*I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy*

2. BUT GOD LOVES—FORGIVES—AND RESTORES US

- a. Because of His very **nature**—He **loves** us
 - **Love is the motive** behind forgiveness
- b. Because of His **character**—**mercy**—He withholds punishment
 - Debt is **forgiven**—He *cancel*s our obligation for payment
 - **Mercy is the quality** behind forgiveness
- c. He does this by His **grace**—which goes *beyond* mercy—in three ways:
 1. **He pays** the debt—unmerited **gift**—we don't deserve
 - Because we cannot do it ourselves—it is not our works
 2. He sets us free—he **releases** us
 - From bondage of sin and guilt—we are **'let go'**
 3. He **restores** us to His favor
 - No longer outcast—but welcome servants in His house—and more
 4. **Grace is the means and goal** of forgiveness
- d. Not presumptuous mercy—not cheap grace
 - He does not forgive because we demand it—but because He loves us
 - We don't snap our fingers and get it just because we want it
 - He expects obedience—when He forgives—and He wants us to forgive

C. GOD WANTS US TO FORGIVE OTHERS

1. TO STAVE OFF THE NEGATIVE

- a. **Sinful human nature** craves revenge
 - Some cherish wrongs done to them—self-justifying and selfish
- b. If we are **unforgiving**
 1. It opposes God's very **nature**—to love
 - He wants us to love not only Him—but also others
 - God despises ingratitude—it goes against His very nature
 2. It opposes His **purpose** in forgiving us—to free us—'to let go'
 - When we harbor unforgiveness—it enslaves our spirit
 - Gary Enrig—***Forgiveness is a servant of the will, not a prisoner of the emotions.***
 3. It leads to resentment and bitterness

Heb 12:14-15—*Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled.*

2. TO ENCOURAGE THE POSTIVE

- a. God's principle of **continuity**—**pass it on**
 - Forgiveness is God letting go of our sin
 - **He lets go—so we can let go**—and forgive other's sins—so they can let go . . .
- b. Potential results
 1. Peace of heart and mind—spiritual health
 2. Physical health
 - Bitterness blocks self-healing—emotionally and physically
 3. It can transform the world around us
 - Imagine—what if every Christian forgave every trespass of their rights tomorrow
 4. Eternal consequences
 - If we do not forgive—we 'bind' others
 - If we do forgive—we 'loose' others
 - View this through the redemptive mission of the church—in the back-story

Mt 18:18—Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.

3. HOW TO FORGIVE

- a. **Unlimited**
 1. Like **God** forgives us—**repeatedly**—inexhaustibly
 - We cannot out-give God—we cannot out-forgive God
 2. Counting the number of times—is not forgiving—but keeping score
 - This was Jesus' point to Peter—not 3 times—not 7—but innumerably
 3. The extent
 - Times—repeatedly—each new time is the first time!
 - Size—even biggest offenses—not just trivial matters
 - Scope—universal—for anyone, everywhere
- b. **Unconditional**
 1. Totally—let the person completely off the hook
 - Not harboring bitterness or anger
 - Not telling others what he/she did
 - Not loading the person with guilt
 2. God does this with us
 - Even to the point of protecting us from our own secrets!
- c. **Un-remembering**
 1. We cannot completely forget—only God can do this perfectly

2. And forgiveness is not just trying to forget
 - **Ex: Eisenhower’s waste drawer—of discarded names—forgotten people**

I make it a practice to avoid hating anyone. If someone has been guilty of despicable actions, especially towards me, I try to forget him. I used to follow a practice—somewhat contrived I admit—to write the man’s name on a scrap of paper, drop it into my bottom drawer and say to myself, “That finishes the incident, and as far as I’m concerned, that person.”
 - That is not forgiveness—it simply discards persons with polite disdain
 - Don’t ‘forget’ **people**—don’t write them off as inconvenient unwanted problems
3. But forgiveness—*does* involve forgetting—letting go of the **offending act**
 - Once we truly forgive—don’t cling to the offense—‘**let it go**’
 - ‘Let go’ = **definition of forgiveness**—4 times in this passage—**vv 21, 27, 32, 35**

VII. APPLICATION

1. FORGIVENESS IS HARD—IT FORGIVES THE ‘UNFORGIVABLE’
2. FORGIVENESS IS A FREE CHOICE
 - Like love—nobody can coerce another to do it
 - We can choose to harbor ill will—and be captives to it—or to forgive and be free
3. FORGIVENESS IS NOT RECONCILIATION
 - Reconciliation is rebuilding
 - Reconciliation requires both parties—and sometimes is not possible
 - But reconciliation begins with one person forgiving—which is always possible
4. WHEN WE REFUSE TO FORGIVE OTHERS
 - We take God’s mercy for granted—we despise it—like the wicked servant did
 - We cheapen God’s grace—by acting like it is not sufficient to forgive others
 - Because it is not we who forgive—but God’s grace working in us—through Christ!
5. WHEN WE FORGIVE OTHERS UNCONDITIONALLY
 - It is a nearly perfect act of love—which the world does not understand
 - It shows we are making an effort to be ‘perfect, as our Father in heaven is perfect’
6. FORGIVING OTHERS KEEPS US HONEST
 - It reminds us of our own **enormous debt**—that we too are **forgiven** solely by God’s **grace**

Eph 4:32—Paul to the church—*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ has forgiven you.*

VIII. INVITATION

JESUS, THOU JOY OF LOVING HEARTS

O Jesus, joy of loving hearts,
thou fount of life, thou light of men,
from fullest bliss that earth imparts
we turn unfilled to thee again,
we turn unfilled to thee again.

Thy truth unchanged has ever stood,
thou savest those that on thee call;
to them that seek thee, thou art good,
to them that find thee, all in all
to them that find thee, all in all.

We taste thee, O thou living bread,
and long to feast upon thee still;
we drink of thee, the fountain-head,
and thirst our souls from thee to fill,
and thirst our souls from thee to fill.

Our restless spirits yearn for thee,
where'er our changeful lot is cast,
glad that thy gracious smile we see,
blest that our faith can hold thee fast,
blest that our faith can hold thee fast.

O Jesus, ever with us stay,
make all our moments calm and bright;
chase the dark night of sin away,
shed o'er the world thy holy light,
shed o'er the world thy holy light.