

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

Matthew 18:21-35

David Ackerman

April 10, 1992

The parables of Jesus contain such rich truths that any attempt on a definitive interpretation ultimately leads to self-defeat. We must be ever cautious in our approach to timeless truths, realizing that in such simple and yet illusive stories as the parables, God has chosen to speak to us. In our attempts to interpret, we must both listen to the Holy Spirit and do our best to understand as much as possible about the background that colors parable interpretation. The parable at hand speaks of the two-faced nature of the human predicament. The attempt will be made to remain open-minded to the Spirit's prompting concerning this human predicament.

I. The Text

A. Translation from the GNT³

21. Then coming (to Jesus) Peter said to him, "Lord, how often (when) my brother sins (lit. "will sin") against me should I forgive him? Seven times?" 22. Jesus said to him, "I say to you not seven but seventy-seven times. 23. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wished to settle account with his servants. 24. But when he began to settle, one man was brought to him who owed ten thousand talents. 25. And since this one did not have (money) to repay, the master commanded him to be sold with (his) wife and children and all the things which he had, (in order that the sum might) be paid back. 26. Therefore, falling upon (his knees) the servant was begging him saying, 'Be patient with me, and I will repay you everything.' 27. And the master of that servant being compassionate released him and forgave his debt (lit. "the debt in reference to him"). 28. But when that servant left, he found another of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred denarii, and seizing him he choked (him) saying, 'Pay what you owe!' 29. Therefore, falling upon (his knees) his fellow servant cried out to him saying, 'Be patient with me, and I will repay you!' 30. And he did not wish to but leaving he cast him into prison until he should repay what he owed. 31. Therefore, when his fellow servants saw the things which had taken place they were greatly disturbed, and going to their own master they explained all the things which had taken place. 32. Then calling him his master said to him, 'Evil servant, I forgave all your obligation because you begged me. 33. And should you not be merciful to your fellow servants, as I myself was merciful to you?' 34. And being angry his master gave him to

the torturers until he should repay everything he owed. 35. My father who is in heaven will do this to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."

B. Exegetical Notes

To begin with, several exegetical notations upon the text itself will enrich our subsequent investigation. In the area of verb tenses, as is often the case in the Synoptics we find the historical present used several times in this passage (*legei*, 22; *exei*, 25, 32). In vs. 21 *apheso* is probably a future indicative of deliberation. In vs. 26 the imperfect tense in *prosekunei* suggests a persistence in begging or falling down prostrate. Many aorists could be classified as historical and merely describe the action as taking place at some point in time, a quite appropriate use of the tense for a parable. The aorist passive infinitive *prathenai* in vs. 25 shows the helplessness of the servant in his desperate situation.

Several significant words need clarified also. "Forgiveness" *aphiemi* is a crucial word in this passage, being used in verses 21, 27, 32, 35 (Peter to his brother, the master to his servant, and God to the disciples). The basic meaning of this word is "to send off," "to release," "to hurl," "to let be," or "to pardon." It can often mean to cancel a debt (as in vs. 27 and 32), the forgiveness of a violation or personal injury (as in vs. 21), or in a religious sense the forgiveness of sins (as in verse 35). Bultmann comments that *aphiemi* as forgiveness is not a well-developed theme in Paul and John, but other concepts aid in developing a fuller picture of forgiveness.¹ *Hebdomekontakis hepta* in vs. 22 has been variously translated as "seventy times seven" (490) or "seventy-seven times" (77). *BAG²* believes that "seventy-seven times" is more likely, but either term is hyperbolic in this context and shows the extremity of Jesus' reply. Dan Via indicates that *dei* "should" of vs. 33 is characteristically used of the divine necessity. "The strength of this

1 Rudolf Bultmann, "Aphiemi," *TDNT*, 88.

2 Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *Lexicon*, 213.

word suggests the inescapability of the existential reality implied in the parable."³ Several monetary terms appear in this passage such as *opheilo* "owe," *apodidomi* "give," "repay," "give back," *piprasko* "sell," and *daneios* "debt," or "loan." These terms suggest the economic situation of the parable, although, as noted, Jesus applies the term, "to forgive" or "to cancel a debt," to God in relation to the disciples at the conclusion of the parable.

C. Old Testament Background Issues

Several Old Testament issues present important background information to this parable. For example, Genesis 4:24, "If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold," has often been pointed out as a possible parallel to Jesus' statement in vs. 22, but with the interesting reversal of application. Whereas once the case was revenge, now the case is forgiveness. Three times was the traditional limit for forgiveness (cf. Amos 1:3, 6, 9; Job 33:29). Albert Barnett says, "Forgiveness was thus a sort of moral parole rather than a cancellation of the past in the interest of a new beginning."⁴ Barnett adds that in this passage

the object of forgiveness. . . is to give a man a thoroughly new opportunity and divert attention from the past to the present and future. It is designed to effect a change of heart as the foundation of actual righteousness. Understood in any other sense, it loses its moral meaning and becomes essentially immoral.⁵

II. Historical and Cultural Details of the Parable

This parable revolves around the issue of forgiveness. When Peter approached Jesus with the question about how many times he should forgive his brother and then offers the tremendous figure of seven times instead of the standard three or four, he must have been expecting a pat on the back. But instead, he received an answer which he was not expecting. William Barclay

³ Dan O. Via, *The Parables* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 142, referring to Linnemann, *Gleichnisse*, 166. Cf. Mk 8:31; 13:7; Matt. 23:23; Lk 22:7; 24:26; Jn. 3:14.

⁴ Albert E. Barnett, *Understanding the Parables of Our Lord* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1940), 76.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 77-78.

points out that a Rabbinic saying was, "If a man transgresses once, forgive him; if a second time, forgive him; if a third time, forgive him; if a fourth time, do not forgive him."⁶ Jesus was clearly going beyond the historical precedence for forgiveness.

To illustrate the idea of forgiveness Jesus uses the example story of a servant who was forgiven a tremendous amount of money. The amounts of the debts given in this parable are culturally significant. The ratio of the amounts is at least 6000:1, 10,000 talents equaling at least 60,000,000 denarii or 164,383 years of labor for the average Palestinian. The talent was the highest currency, 10,000 the highest number in arithmetic, and the denarius the smallest denomination. To illustrate the enormity of the debt, Barclay says, "The annual taxation of the provinces of Judea, Idumea and Samaria brought in a total of 600 talents; while that of Galilee and Perea amount to 200 talents. The debt was more than the income of a whole group of provinces. It was quite beyond paying."⁷ Joachim Jeremias believes that the amount of debt makes the first "servant" really a satrap (governor) who was responsible for the revenue of a province. The other servant could likely be a minor official. He shows that the phrase "his fellow servants" as found in the LXX (Ezra 4:7, 9, 17, 23; 5:3, 6; 6:6, 13) denotes high officials, among them the governors of Palestine and Syria.⁸ Jeremias would be the first to admit that whether the servant was a governor or not is unrelated to the point of the parable. The amounts of the debts, however, become crucial in the clear contrast Jesus sets up. The first servant would be totally unable to pay his debt. The second fellow-servant if given time could repay his debt since 100 denarii was probably about 100 days wages (see Matthew 20:2). If the first servant wanted his money then there would be no need to throw his debtor in prison.

⁶ William Barclay, *And Jesus Said: A Handbook on the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 86.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 87; see also Josephus, *Ant.* XVII, xi, 4.

⁸ Joachim Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), 165.

The setting of this parable is not very Semitic for several reasons. First, as Jeremias indicates, Jewish law forbade torture. Furthermore, in reference to verse 25, Jeremias says,

First [the evil servant's] lands and house property are to be sold. Jewish law allowed an Israelite to be sold only in case of theft, if the thief could not restore what he had stolen; the sale of a wife was absolutely forbidden under Jewish jurisdiction; thus the king and his 'servants' are represented as Gentiles.⁹

Another non-Jewish element in this parable occurs when the servant takes his fellow-servant by the neck. Barclay explains,

The Roman and Greek practice was to grasp a debtor by the neck of his toga and rush him half-throttled to court; for quite often in the ancient world the plaintiff in a case made his own arrests. The Greeks talked about choking the life out of a debtor when they meant dragging him to court.¹⁰

According to David Wenham, many people lived at the poverty level in Palestine, close to the point of starvation. Debt was a major problem in first-century Palestine because to avoid starvation the poor out of desperation would approach money lenders for loans. When they could not pay back their debt, they would beg for mercy much like the servant in this parable. If they could not pay their debts, then the prison awaited them. The prisons were probably very unpleasant and insanitary. Prisoners would be chained or put into stocks and held until their family or friends came up with the money which they owed. Torture was also a favorite way of making people pay their debts.¹¹ Although some of the elements in this parable are exaggerated, the situation described was a common occurrence for many of the unfortunate throughout the ancient world.

III. Structural and Literary Analysis

Some of the contrasts that have been alluded to so far find clear delineation in a structural and literary analysis. This parable is an excellent example of the artistry of Jesus as a story teller.

9 Ibid.

10 Barclay, 87.

11 David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1989), 153.

John Dominic Crossan calls this section a "small masterpiece of dramatic choreography in three tightly integrated scenes." He offers this three-part division:

	<u>Scene 1</u>	<u>Scene 2</u>	<u>Scene 3</u>
Introduction:	23-25	28	31
Words:	26	29	32-33
Action:	27	30	34. ¹²

Another possible division might be

	<u>Scene 1</u>	<u>Scene 2</u>	<u>Scene 3</u>
The Situation:	24	28a	31
Confrontation and threat:	25	28b	32
The Cry for Mercy:	26	29	33
The Verdict:	27	30	34

The second scene is in clear contrast to the first scene. In each scene the situation is given, the lender confronts and threatens the debtor, the debtor cries for mercy (in scene 3 the cry for mercy is too late), and a verdict is given. There are three significant reversals in this parable which occur at the giving of the verdict in each scene. In the first two scenes the lender approaches the debtor asking for repayment (24, 28). In both cases the debtors ask for mercy and time to repay (25, 29). The first reversal occurs in scene 1 when the servant is forgiven the extravagant sum of 10,000 talents. This is totally unprecedented. The master had every right to imprison the servant. The second reversal occurs when the servant who had just been forgiven the 10,000 talent debt turns around and unconditionally demands the payment of 100 denarii from his fellow servant. One would expect the unforgiven servant to be merciful since he had just been extended mercy. A final twist of events occurs in scene 3 when the master learns of the unmercifulness of his servant. This time the reversal backfires on the servant. He is caught and no mercy will be extended to him.

Via has some helpful insights into the literary genius of this parable. He suggests that the

¹² John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 106.

dramatic quality of fiction and of literature of the stage is centered in encounter--characteristically involving conflict--and dialogue. He classifies this parable as "low mimetic mode" which is when the protagonist is superior neither to others nor to his or her environment but is rather like us.¹³ He sees the unforgiving servant as central to this parable because "his changing fate determines the narrative form. To ignore this turns the parable into an illustrated exhortation and forfeits its aesthetic power." This parable has a downward moving plot: "The Protagonist begins in a good situation and moves to catastrophe."¹⁴

Thus, the central figure of the parable is the unforgiving servant. The points of contrast center around either the actions done to this servant or actions done by this servant. The central motifs of this parable, therefore, will be found in relation to this servant. The best place to look for these motifs is at the points of reversal in each of the three scenes.

IV. Matthean Contextual Considerations

The Matthean context will shed further light into the message(s) of this parable. This parable is found only in Matthew. Since this is the case, we can gain significant clues from Matthew's broader context in that he had a reason for inserting this parable in his story of Jesus. It is generally accepted that Matthew wrote with the purpose of presenting Jesus as the Messianic King of Old Testament prophecy.¹⁵ Matthew's Jesus appears as the expectant king of the Jews (2:2) calling, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (4:17). In the Sermon on the Mount we see Jesus concerned about the morality of those who wish to be called His disciples. We find both mercy (5:7) and righteousness (5:20). The important theme of forgiveness appears in the "Lord's Prayer": "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (6:12). Directly

13 Via, 98-99.

14 Ibid., 139.

15 Edward Hastings, *The Speakers Bible*, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1971), 8.

after this Matthew has Jesus saying, "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (6:14-15). In a similar vein Jesus says that the same measure one uses against others is the same measure that will be used against that one (7:2). Matthew's gospel is relatively void of parables until chapter 13 where seven are given back to back. And then there is another drought of parables until chapter 18. Interspersed between these two groups of parables are found descriptions of the miraculous Jesus as the true fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

John Donahue calls chapter 18 the Sermon on the Church, or On Life in Community. He adds that the parables in this chapter "each deal with Matthew's distinctive understanding of 'justice' (Hebrew, *sedaqah*; Greek, *dikaioσύνη*), a concern where Matthew manifests the profound influence of his Jewish heritage."¹⁶ Senior says that Matthew turns the Sermon on the Mount into ecclesiology in ch. 18. He notes that Matthew often juxtaposes calls for mercy with warnings of judgment. He adds, "The Jesus of Matthew's Gospel incessantly preaches the need for responsible action as the sign of authentic faith" (3:7-10; 7:21; 21:28-32; 25:31-46; 24:45-46). Matthew emphasizes responsible action; "This emphasis on responsibility may reflect Matthew's strong Jewish heritage in which obedience to the Torah was always the touchstone of authentic faith."¹⁷ Donahue further states, "Matthew's Jesus teaches his disciples that pursuit of the justice of the kingdom flows from the experience of unmerited forgiveness from God. They are to manifest it to others with the realization that God's justice is always joined with mercy and with surprising lovingkindness."¹⁸ The immediate context of our passage finds Jesus speaking to His disciples about the brother who has sinned how this one might be restored to community.

¹⁶ John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 70.

¹⁷ Donald Senior, "Matthew 18:21-35," *Interpretation* 41 (Oct. 1987): 407.

¹⁸ Donahue, 72.

This must have prompted Peter's question in 18:21. Directly after this parable Jesus leaves Galilee for the region of Judea where He speaks further on the radical call of discipleship, and--almost ironically--on the topic of divorce, an issue for which the call for forgiveness is so needed.

Some scholars have questioned the authenticity of this parable. Dan Via, for example, sees Matthew as making the connection between 18:21 and 18:22. He adds, "Matt. 18:35 appears to be Matthew's conclusion to the whole of chapter 18 rather than the original application of the parable, and it reflects Matthew's legalistic tendency."¹⁹ In addition, Martinus De Boer argues that Matthew is responsible for inflating the amount of the servant's debt from 10,000 denarii to 10,000 talents to make a more fantastic sum. He summarizes as Matthew's redaction (1) vs. 35 Matthew shaped or constructed parable's application into allegory; (2) vs. 26 he substitutes *prosekynēi* for *parekalei* to encourage the allegorizing interpretation that emerges in vs. 35; (3) he has rewritten the introduction to the parable using king instead of man; and (4) he has inflated the amount of the servants debt to underscore God's mercy.²⁰ De Boer's criticisms are enlightening but are really nonessential to the central message of the parable to which we turn next.

V. The Parable in the Message of Jesus

This parable was another shocking newness of the unfolding kingdom of God. Jesus' reply went beyond anything that the disciples had probably heard said about the matter of forgiveness. It would have been interesting to see the look of amazement on the disciples' faces when Jesus said that Peter should forgive seventy-seven times, or in other words, that he should

¹⁹ Via, 138-139.

²⁰ Martinus C. De Boer, "Ten Thousand Talents? Matthew's Interpretation and the Redaction of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:23-35)," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (Ap. 1988): 228-229.

forgive unlimited times. The kingdom of God is not a matter of personal righteousness, of counting how many times one has forgiven the brother or sister. Rather, the kingdom of God is a matter of transformation. Donald Senior explains that the community of Jesus is built on a different order than that of the world:

Unlike ordinary human community (whose spirit is reflected in the disciples' question) where determining the pecking order is often an important first item of business--and survival--the community of Jesus is built on a different set of values, values which often run counter to or even subvert normal assumptions. Strangely, in the Kingdom of Heaven the one who is humble is the greatest, the one who appears the weakest is to be the most treasured.²¹

Furthermore, this parable shows the reversal of attitude necessary for those wishing to be disciples of Jesus. This parable fits with Jesus' sayings that go, "You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you. . ." (5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43, etc.). Jesus' self-declaration was that He did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfill them (5:17ff). In this parable Jesus demonstrates a type of God's mercy through the master's forgiving of the enormous debt of the servant. Before the disciples could get too comfortable, Jesus also declares a type of God's justice through the master's retribution of the unrepentant servant.

Finally, this parable calls the disciple to respond to the indicative of the realities that come with the kingdom of God. Jesus brought news of the new reality of unlimited forgiveness of sins for those who trust in God. George Buttrick says, "'Ten thousand talents' justly describes not only our bankruptcy of soul, but also the measure of Divine compassion."²² The response to the kingdom of God must issue in the imperative, the "go and do likewise." The disciple is one who is like the Master, a "follower" or "pupil" (*mathetes*). The disciples' commission was to actualize the kingdom throughout the world (Matt. 28:18-20) and they could do this based upon

²¹ Senior, 403.

²² George A. Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1928), 100.

the indicative experience of the Messianic living Jesus Christ.

Thus, the parabolic sentence for this parable might be something like this: True disciples are ones who actualize the kingdom of God through modeling the same actions in relationships as seen in God's relationship towards them.

VI. The Message and Application

With this basic premise in mind we can turn to the message and application of this parable to its listeners. As was mentioned before, the main messages of the parable come from the reversals in each scene. Significantly, Craig Blomberg finds his messages from the three divisions within the parable:

The first section magnificently illustrates the boundless grace of God in forgiving sins, as the king forgave his servant. (2) In the middle section, the second servant underlines the absurdity of grace spurned; one who has been forgiven so much and yet so mistreats his fellow debtor does not serve to live. (3) The final section depicts the frightful fate awaiting the unforgiving, as the wicked servant discovered to his ruin.²³

In this parable the disciples once again learned of the radicalness of the kingdom of God. They learned of the depth of their depravity and the limitless depth of God's forgiveness. They learned the responsibility that they have to model this same type of action to others. Barclay points out that one fault of the servant was that "he demanded standards from others which he was not prepared to fulfill himself. Of all human faults, this is the most common. We are, for instance, often very critical of others and very easy with ourselves. We are often open-eyed to the faults of others and unwilling to see our own."²⁴ In this parable the disciples also learned that along with mercy comes justice and this justice is based upon judgment of their actions toward their brothers and sisters.

We can take these same principles to heart as well. Barclay exquisitely says, "...the man

²³ Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1990), 242-243.

²⁴ Barclay, 88.

who has really appreciated what the love of God has done for him, cannot but love others and seek always to forgive as he has been forgiven."²⁵ Relationship is very important in this parable and in the broader context. Via aptly states,

The parable suggests that one may unexpectedly find an openness or receptivity in others which delivers one from a pressing problem and opens up a surprising new possibility for existence. If the new situation is not internalized, however, so that one becomes open to others and can relinquish claims, then the new situation is lost. To accept what is undeserved from others without extending such graciousness dries up the capacity to receive, and one's isolation is thus made complete.²⁶

Because God has first forgiven us, we are we enabled to forgive with the true limitless forgiveness implied in this parable. But lest we begin to feel secure in our religious perches, the realities of the kingdom of God call us to accountability both to God and to our brothers and sisters.

25 Ibid., 90.

26 Via, 142.

Bibliography

- Barclay, William. *And Jesus Said: A Handbook on the Parables of Jesus*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970.
- Barnett, Albert E. *Understanding the Parables of Our Lord*. Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1940.
- Bauer, Walter, William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979.
- Blomberg, Craig L. *Interpreting the Parables*. Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1990.
- Buttrick, George A. *The Parables of Jesus*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1928.
- Crossan, John Dominic. *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.
- De Boer, Martinus C. "Ten Thousand Talents? Matthew's Interpretation and the Redaction of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:23-35)." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (Ap. 1988): 214-232.
- Donahue, John R. *The Gospel in Parable*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988.
- Hastings, Edward. "Matthew." *The Speakers Bible*. Vol. 6. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1971.
- Jeremias, Joachim. *Rediscovering the Parables*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966.
- Kittel, Gerhard and Gerhard Friedrich eds. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Abridged by Geoffrey Bromiley. Grand Rapid: Eerdmans, 1985.
- Scott, Bernard Brandon. "The King's Accounting: Matthew 18:23-34." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (Sept. 1985): 429-442.
- Senior, Donald. "Matthew 18:21-35." *Interpretation* 41 (Oct. 1987): 403-407.
- Via, Dan Otto. *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967.
- Wenham, David. *The Parables of Jesus*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1989.