

Matthew 18:23-35

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Jesus tells Peter a parable to emphasize the importance of unlimited forgiveness. It is about how the king forgives an absurdly unpayable debt of one of his ministers when the minister begs for mercy. But this same minister is unwilling to forgive a modest debt that one of his peers owes him. He has the debtor thrown into prison. When the king learns of this unmerciful minister, he seizes him and has him thrown in prison until the debt is paid.

This parable is unparalleled in the other gospel accounts.

Peter had just asked Jesus if he should establish the limits of his mercy at forgiving his brother up to seven times for offenses done against him. Jesus said no, and rhetorically told Peter to forgive his brother without any limitations when He said to forgive him up to seventy times seven (Matthew 18:21-23).

Jesus then told a parable to depict *the reason* why Peter should show his brother unlimited mercy.

He began by comparing *the kingdom of heaven to a king who wished to settle accounts with his subjects*. The *king's* subjects or *slaves* owed him money. And the *king* was calling on these debts to be paid off. *When he had begun to settle the debts, one of the king's subjects, likely a high ranking official, who owed him a substantial amount of ten thousand talents was brought before him to settle.*

A talent was a large amount of money. Estimates vary on just how much a talent would be worth in modern terms. But one way of measuring it by considering the fact that a single talent was worth twenty years of a common laborer's wages. A current (2022) approximation might be to say a modest wage labor earns \$40,000.00 in salary plus benefits. If so this comes to \$800,000.00. When Jesus said the servant *owed ten thousand talents*, His point was not the precise amount (in our case \$8 billion), any more than the limits of forgiveness was to be four hundred and ninety times (Matthew 18:22). His point was that the debt the servant *owed his king* was absurdly unpayable for him.

Jesus underscored the hopelessness of his situation in the next line of the parable when he said, *but since he obviously did not have the means to repay*. Because the slave could not pay this amount back, the *king commanded* that the servant *be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had until repayment could be made*—which would effectively be never. *The slave* was utterly ruined.

So the servant lost all his dignity and *fell to the ground and prostrated himself* in desperation, begging to be forgiven. He pleaded, *Have patience with me and I will repay you everything*. There was virtually zero percent chance that the slave would be able to ever pay what he owed

the king. The king was well aware of this, but nevertheless, the king *felt compassion*. He showed his servant mercy *and released him*. He astonishingly even *forgave him the staggering debt*.

The slave had been forgiven everything. *He* had been forgiven what *he* could never have *paid* back. *The slave* had been shown infinite mercy.

But after being forgiven so much, *that* very same servant *went out* from his master's merciful presence *and found one of his* co-workers *who owed him* some money. The amount of the fellow slave's debt was *a hundred denarii*. A denarius was worth a day's wages. So, this amount was considerable (a third of a year's income—\$13,333.33 in our example) but minuscule by comparison to what the king's servant was forgiven.

When the king's *slave found his* debtor, *he seized him and began to choke him*. *He* demanded with violence that *he* be repaid and ordered *him* to *pay back what you owe me*. The fellow slave responded the same way that he had responded before the king. *The fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him* in desperation. He too said *'Have patience with me and I will repay you.'*

But, Jesus said, this *slave was unwilling* to show the kind of mercy that was shown *to him* by the king. So, *he went and threw his fellow slave* into prison *until he should pay back what was owed*.

Some of their fellow slaves saw what had happened and were disturbed. *They were deeply grieved*. And so they *came and reported to the king* how their co-worker was *treated*.

The king summoned his *pardoned slave*. And *he chastised him*, *'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?'* The king was furious with *his slave* for his lack of mercy and *handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him*.

This debt would hypothetically take many lifetimes for *the slave* to *pay back*, but perhaps by the end of it, he would have learned the meaning and value of mercy.

Jesus then summed up the point of the parable. It was the mercy principle from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:7; 6:14-15, 7:1-2): *My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart*.

The takeaway Jesus intended for Peter to learn was let your mercy be infinite so you too will receive infinite mercy. If your mercy has limits, God will limit the mercy that He gives you in His kingdom accordingly. It is therefore greatly in our best interest to show unlimited mercy to others. This is a corollary to the principle Jesus stated in the Sermon on the Mount, that we create the standard by which God will judge us by how we judge other humans during our time on earth (Matthew 7:1-3).

Biblical Text

For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. 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. So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. 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.' So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?' And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."