

An Unpayable Debt: On Forgiveness

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GOD's character is unchanging, unfailing, and impartial. Our current value systems are upset by GOD's holy standards. While we have notions of fairness and justice that are reasonable to us, they often contradict those that are set forth by GOD. The parables of Jesus are more than just *cute* little illustrations for the sake of our good pleasure. The parables are more than just tales told to *teach us lessons*. The parables are in fact much more. These stories expose us to the very nature and the ways of GOD. To the unsanctified ear and eye, they may be just stories, fables, or insightful tales, but for the believer, the parables allow us glimpses into the very essence and the will of GOD. What we find in them is often disturbing and sometimes unsettling as they relate to our everyday experiences. We find indeed that His ways are not our ways! We find also that although we have traveled a great distance since we met Jesus, there is still a long way to go—as it does not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is! (1 John 3:2).

GOD is merciful and longsuffering, gracious and generous. We are all (whether we acknowledge it or not) recipients and beneficiaries of His amazing grace. This grace received is also required of us. In Matthew 18:21-35, Jesus tells a parable about forgiveness:

²¹Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” ²²Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

²³“Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants [or bondservants]. ²⁴When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents [a monetary unit worth about twenty years’ wages for a laborer]. ²⁵And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. ²⁶So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii [a day’s wage for a laborer], and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. ³²Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³And should not you have had mercy

on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”¹

A Closer Look

Both men in our text owed an *unpayable* debt. The first man begged mercy of his lord and was ultimately absolved of his debt and set free. This same man went out, free from his debts, and ruthlessly punished a man who owed him a sum much less than what he was forgiven from his lord. Both men owed debts they could not pay, although one was much greater than the other (any debt you don’t have money to pay is huge). The first man received mercy but was not merciful. He was a hypocrite. The mercy he received, while it should have compelled him to be merciful, only made him sanctimonious. The first man’s debts were forgiven, but his heart was still in bondage! Beware of judging your intentions while judging others for their actions—it is always lopsided!

When we are unforgiving, we create prisons in our own lives. We hold people captive in our hearts and minds when we refuse to forgive. At the same time, by our own choosing, we determine to imprison ourselves in cells of bitterness, distrust, and vengeance. We isolate ourselves from genuine loving relationships because we cannot look beyond another’s faults, we cannot absorb the results of another’s wrong, and we refuse to forget the weaknesses and indiscretion of others. While our goal may be to hold others accountable and attain some sense of justice, we undermine our own freedom and chances at happiness!

Many of us are still grieving over wrongs committed against us in the past. We have tried to pull ourselves up and out of this pit, tried to move beyond the past, tried to move on with life, but it seems like we aren’t making any progress. Traumas, both individual and corporate, traverse generations and abort future hopes and healings. We simply cannot move on because we have circumvented the first step—we must forgive. The first step we must take in our own healing is to forgive “them”—whoever “they” may be! The wounds caused may leave scars that remain, but the pain does not have to. This becomes our choice. LORD, help us.

So, as we receive GOD’s mercy, let us also receive GOD’s strength. Let *them* go, set *them* free from our hearts, forgive them with all our hearts, and allow GOD to remove every bitter pain! While our suffering indelibly shapes us, we mustn’t allow it to be what defines us. To live with unresolved pain tethers us to our trauma and binds us to brokenness and bitterness. This needn’t be the case. There is a way forward beyond our fractious former lives. We can be healed and become whole.

Now, to be clear, this forgiveness is not simply some mental, emotional exercise. This is deep spiritual work that forces us to reckon with the unpayable debt that we all owe. We need more grace. We need the LORD’s help. This deep spiritual work forces us to find common ground with our offenders and to see ourselves even within them. This is tough work, and it demands the utmost humility—a contrition wrought in us only as we find ourselves alone in GOD’s presence. This type of humility occurs only as we realize our own unpayable debts and the grace that has been afforded us. We can be healed, whole, and forgiven.

How awesome and troubling is it to stand alone before GOD! How overwhelm-

ing is it to stand in the presence of the One who knows everything about us—every thought, every word, every deed, every hidden desire – but somehow refuses to repent of His love.

GOD loves us and will not change His mind about us. Regardless of our indebtedness, we are commended His love. While deserving judgment, we receive grace and forgiveness. We can be healed, whole, and forgiven, but we must realize that our receipt of these good gifts will also be required of us. Our unpayable debt is met with GOD's unconditional love, the costs of which are unquantifiable—the impact undeniable and irresistible. We are healed, whole, and forgiven. As we have received freely, so must we give. We must grant others the same mercy we have received and desire from Our Lord—and the healing it brings!

We once owed debts we could not pay, so Jesus paid a debt he did not owe! How do we live this out daily and practically? How do we model this when confronted with systemic injustice and institutional evil? I imagine there are many strategies we might employ, but regardless of inclinations—whether they tend toward personal piety or striving for public justice (the dichotomy here is shaky)—we must begin with forgiveness.

³⁵But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. ³⁶Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful (Luke 6:35-36).

LORD, as we receive your grace and forgiveness, we reckon with our unpayable debts. We also reckon with our scars and those who have wounded us. We are the same. LORD have mercy. We are the same. As you have dealt graciously with us—as you have forgiven us—help us to forgive. We need your help. Amen

Note

1 The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 18:21–35.