# *"Invested Liberation"*

## *Matthew 18:21-35*

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I recently received an email from my bank. They were generously offering to cut my credit card interest rate to 7%—basically 30% of its current rate—for six months. Now, I immediately deleted it because that's what I do with junk email. And I didn't think too much about this until I reflected more deeply on our passage for today. Because, between the bank and the king in this story, what we have here is an account of two very different economies.

It begins with a scene familiar enough to us. There's a crediting agency—the king—and the bills have come due. Here comes a slave—the passage calls them a servant, but they are a slave, because that's what anyone who has maxed out every and any line of credit that they, their children, their grandchildren, and their great-grandchildren combined could ever have, really is: a slave. And this king—who is really a stand-in for God—let this servant get way too far into debt. Although the worth of a talent varied in different periods, ten thousand talents represented between thirty and one hundred million days' wages for an average peasant—a lot of work. This dude owes the king more money than existed in circulation in the whole country at the time! This is lifelong, *generations*-long debt and they will never be able to pay the king back; it's beyond impossible. He was a fool to get so far in debt and, frankly, the king had been a fool to let him get away with it. Why? Why did the king allow the debt to go so far? Why would the king extend so much credit?

And I'll pause here to remind us of my six months' lowered interest offer. Why would they be so generous? Why would they want to make it so easy to run up my debt? The answer is pretty obvious to us, right? They want to lower my interest rate so that I'll maybe splurge a little more than usual—or even, a lot more than usual—hoping that I'll come out the tail end of those six months carrying debt that I hadn't planned for. Debt that I can't pay off right away. Debt that they can charge me that original interest rate on every month I roll it over. And, of course, you can sort of see this little thought-bubble skit that is playing out in the heads of those banking marketers as they rub their hands together, adding up the dollars and cents. And this is our economy, right? You can't get through life in this country without some kind of debt—even if it's student loans—and all that debt comes with an interest rate because that's the price you pay to spend money you don't have. We know this and we have known this since the day we turned 18 and people were offering us, not voting registration forms, but free t-shirts and baseball hats and bonus points to sign up for their credit card. It all sounds like a good idea at the time, but, well, it's a trap.

But in our story for today, we have a different situation. The creditor—the king—does something that seems pretty much unthinkable. This poor schmuck, who is so far in over his head in debt he doesn't know which way is up, gets the break of a lifetime. He kneels down before the king and begs him, "Please, be patient with me, and I'll pay you back." The king has compassion on him and gives him a pass.

It's not that the king sets him up with a graduated payment plan or even cuts the debt down. The king completely eliminates it. And, honestly, it just doesn't make sense. First of all, why would he let someone who clearly has limited finances run up that kind of debt? And *then*, why would the king totally erase it? Doesn't the king know how to run a kingdom? Like, who put this guy in charge, right?

But of course, this is what Jesus is trying to explain about how God's economy of grace works: we are not on the hook to pay back all the debt that we have accrued. In fact, that's impossible. And, I mean, I really don't know what this servant did to get that far in, but even if you start adding up all the side-eyes, eye rolls, and death stares we give, right there we've racked up at least a couple of weeks worth of wages. And that's just the eyes! That's not including the the selfishness, self-centeredness, and casual cruelties we inflict on one another knowingly and unknowingly. We might not be that bad, but we ain't that good either. And Jesus's point is like, "This is God! She wants you to live free from the crushing burden of all the ways you have failed yourself, the people around you, and God herself!" God's grace is so deep, and so unimaginable, that it doesn't make sense and, really, is impossible to totally grasp. This is what Jesus is trying to say.

But that's only the first half.

The passage began with this question from Peter: "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?"

Jesus answers, "Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy-seven times."

And it's easy to want to be put off really quick. Because, biblically, seventy-seven times is basically, just a lot of times. An infinite number of times. And that feels wrong, it feels almost unfair. And I'm sure it's been mishandled in abusive ways. Folks have been gaslighted into enduring oppressive circumstances and toxic relationships by verses like these. But here's the thing: that's only the first half of what Jesus says. He goes on to say, "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servant," which, is this abundantly generous, impossibly forgiving king, right? But that's not the end of the story!

The servant walks out from underneath this guillotine of debt, free and clear with a new lease on life, only to roll up like Rihanna on someone else, being like "Pay me what you owe me!" This dude literally says the same thing that the servant said to the king—"Please, be patient with me, and I'll pay you back."—but instead of the compassion that he just got served, the servant comes down hard on this guy and throws him in jail until he can pay him back. Now, when the king finds out about this, he is like, "Wait, what? Uh-uh." He withdraws his earlier ruling and gives the servant the same kind of treatment he gave to the other guy.

Jesus started out by saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servant," and we all thought that this was a warm and fuzzy kind of situation until we realize that this king isn't playing. So, when Jesus says, at the end, "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you if you don't forgive your brother or sister from your heart," we realize that God isn't out here writing blank checks. No, God is making an investment.

Because, here's the thing: God isn't a schmuck. God is radically gracious, yes. Radically forgiving, yes. Radically generous, yes. But God is no fool. And because God is no fool; because God has expectations about who you should be and knowledge about who you are *capable* of being, God isn't ready to let your humanness get in the way of you living into the fullness of who you were created to be. And so, God seeks to pull us out of the realities, the circumstances, the legacies of activity that have held us back; to clear out our debts. But what God *can't* stand, what God *won't* put up with, is entitlement and ingratitude. God seeks our liberation—but not just for ourselves, not just so I can go out and get mine. God seeks our liberation … for the liberation of others.

God is ready to forgive—God *wants* to forgive—but it is not without strings attached. It may not be 20% interest, but you better recognize your liberator! And because of this, God does not forget, because there are expectations tied to that forgiveness. And this is where things can start to feel a little tricky, because what gets in the way of us really understanding what God's grace and forgiveness is all about is that we live in a world that is transactional. And because we live in a world that's transactional, this idea that there are strings attached to God's grace and forgiveness can quickly be interpreted as something it's not. This is not a tit-for-tat arrangement. We don't "pay God back." (As if that's even possible.) Nor is it like buying carbon credits to offset our carbon footprint. This is how the capitalistic, consumer-oriented, culture that we've been raised in would have us think. But God's economy runs on a different kind of currency; a denomination of gifts and graces. So, we have to sort of get out of that mindset because it's not that binary and it's not that tight.

God's grace and gift of forgiveness demands something, but it's not pay back and it's not even exactly pay *forward* (although it's not *not* that). God's grace and forgiveness, like I said before, is an investment. It's an investment in our liberation, our transformation, and our vocation. The king did not free the servant so that he could go out and shake down someone else. He freed the servant so the servant could experience a renewal of self worth that would compel him to go out and live his life fully—and make it possible for others to do the same. God's economy is not "I do for you and you do for me," it's "I do for you and you do for others—and they do for still more … on and on and on." God is not in your life to write blank checks, God is making an investment. This is where a theology of personal salvation gets things wrong.

It's not just about me and Jesus; it's about me and Jesus and me and you and me and all of us, together. God wants to liberate you so that you can liberate others. I'll say it one more time in another way, just to make sure you got me: it hasn't changed your life if it's not changing someone else's life in some way. You don't have to be a hero; you just need to let yourself be transformed so deeply inside that it can't help but show up somehow on the outside.

Now, this does *not* mean that there isn't space for rest. It doesn't mean that the only faithful response is to *do* something. For those of us who buy into the idea that our worth is measured according to our productivity, do not hear me saying that what you do determines your value. I really think that the king would have been fine if the servant had walked away and just lived his life, debt-free, being a good and joyful neighbor. It wasn't that the servant didn't walk away and immediately become a model citizen; it's that they walked away and made life hell for someone else! The total lack of compassion, the complete disconnect between the mercy they had received and their attack on the next guy was what unleashed God's anger. God gets angry when justice is perverted and that is exactly what happened in that instance.

We are a forgiven people and so we must act like it. This looks like gratitude. This looks like compassion. This looks like recognizing the gift of what you have been given and allowing that to undo the knots that have been formed within. Knots of survivalism, individualism, secrecy, and scarcity. These knots keep us constricted, and if we do not allow God to loosen them, we will choke out any spiritual renewal that God might enact within us.

God is not keeping score, but God is paying attention. There is a place for anger in the conversation of forgiveness; when the grace we extend is abused, when it is taken for granted, when it is received with ingratitude, there is room for anger.

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And … there is room for grace. There is another part of this story that I play out in my imagination. It's the part where the king comes back to the servant in jail and asks him, "Are you ready now? Are you ready to be a changed person? Are you ready to allow the knots that have grown so tight within you to loosen?" Pen poised over the checkbook. "I am ready to make an investment."

God's offer of forgiveness is here for you. It is an ongoing invitation, ready to make a change within you. Are you ready for it? Are you ready to be changed? Do you want to be renewed? Set free and set forth? Receive God's offer; let it change you, let it liberate you, and let it set you loose for the work of liberation in a world so far in over its head that it can't even begin to imagine what it looks like to be free.