



**The Parables of Jesus**  
**Parables about Grace and Responsibility**  
**The Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:23-35)**  
**The Two Debtors (Luke 7:41-43)**

The Jews of the first century would have been familiar with the idea of the canceling of debts. Deuteronomy 15 speaks of the sabbatical year where “every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbor” (15:2). Leviticus 25 speaks of the Year of Jubilee where the Jews were commanded to “proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.” This idea of the release from debts and liberty would have been familiar to the first century Jew – even though it may have been misunderstood.

The prophet Isaiah comes proclaiming and prophesying the “year of the Lord’s favor” (Isaiah 61) which would be the reality to which the Jewish year of jubilee pointed. And Jesus proclaims in Luke 4:18-21 that this is being fulfilled in His coming. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’ And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, ‘Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’” Jesus has come and has proclaimed the year of the Lord’s favor. And what is it about but the cancellation of debt. It is about the “liberty to the captives,” it is about the “good news.” This is the eschatological Jubilee. Through Jesus Christ, God is forgiving sin, He is canceling debt.

These two parables that are the focus of this lesson are about this very thing – the forgiveness of sin. These parables both show the grace of God in

forgiving our sin as well as the responsibility we have to forgive others and what our response to God’s grace shown should be. Both parables are straightforward and easy to understand and while they relate to one another because of the subject of forgiveness, the point of each are a bit different. The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant has as its emphasis a horizontal application. That is to say, because of what God has done for the one in debt, that person should show the same grace toward those in his debt. This parable is in the context of Jesus teaching the disciples about sin, forgiveness, and restoration. The Parable of the Two Debtors, however, has its emphasis on the response of the one forgiven toward the one who forgave and acts as a juridical parable bringing judgment against the Pharisee.

The Parable of the Two Debtors is the shorter of the two parables. This is the case because its context is not part of the parable itself, but is the context in which it was told. Jesus was eating in the home of a Pharisee. And while He was reclining at the table, a woman of the city, a sinner we are told, began to weep and wet and wipe His feet with her hair and anointed them with the ointment. This woman probably was a prostitute. And one may ask how she just came right in to the dinner where Jesus was. In their day, houses were open, and it was not uncommon for passersby to stop and actually watch a meal take place, particularly when one had guests of importance. But this woman did more than just watch. She actually took an active role with Jesus. Of course, Simon, the Pharisee, didn’t take kindly to this sort of woman being in his house and particularly Jesus allowing her to do such a thing. After all, the very ointment she was using for his feet

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was more than likely a tool of her sinful trade. If it weren't for the tears of the woman, in fact, this would have been a disgraceful act bordering on public indecency. But Jesus didn't see it that way.

Simon said, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." Apparently Simon was undecided at this point. Maybe this is why Simon had invited Jesus to dine with him in the first place – to find out who and what kind of man He was. But this episode was enough for him to make the decision. Because he didn't understand Jesus' mission in "proclaiming liberty" and bringing the forgiveness of sins, this thought never entered his mind. The only thing he could think was, "if Jesus were a prophet, he'd know what kind of woman this is." He didn't even entertain the thought that Jesus did, in fact, know what kind of woman this was, but came to save sinners just like her!

And wonderfully, the parable comes as Jesus' answer to Simon's thoughts, showing, in fact, that He is a prophet beyond any prophet before Him. He knows the thoughts and hearts of men.

And again, the parable is simple. Two debtors owed a moneylender a debt. One's debt was ten times the amount of the other. Yet, the lender forgave both of their debts. And so the question from Jesus was this: "Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answers the question correctly, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt" (Luke 7:43).

Jesus then explains to Simon that the woman was represented by the one who had the larger debt; but she is also the one who loved Him more. Her actions were in response to the grace shown to her by the Lord. And it's interesting here that Luke uses a word for the "canceling of debts" that Matthew does not use. Luke uses the Greek word transliterated as, "charizomai". Some of you reading this may recognize the word "charis" in there. "Charis" is that word we translate as grace. The canceling of debts is

grace. And, of course, that to which the canceling of debt points, the forgiveness of sins, is grace. The woman experiences the amazing grace of God and responds in love to the Lord. Jesus contrasts her response with how the Pharisee had treated Him. "You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment" (Luke 7:45-46).

It's not simply that she was forgiven the greater debt – of course, that's how Jesus gets his point across – but it is that she actually recognized her sin and her need of forgiveness. Jesus said in Mark 2:17, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." She recognized her need of forgiveness and Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven" (Luke 7:48). Of course, this caused those who heard it to ask the all-important question, "Who is this, who even forgives sin?" (Luke 7:49)

He is the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah, the one of whom Isaiah spoke who came proclaiming freedom to the captives and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor.

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant focuses on the depth of the grace of God in forgiving a vast debt and the responsibility of those forgiven to extend that same grace to others. This parable is also a fairly straightforward and simple parable when understood properly. However, it offers the reader the opportunity to exercise proper interpretive rules as well. It is good to remember here that parables are not one-to-one correspondences. That is to say, that while there are correspondences in the parable (the very nature of analogy) it does not mean that each and every detail corresponds to a necessary reality. This

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parable is a good exercise in practicing that rule. If the issue were to be forced here, the reader/interpreter would be required to attribute characteristics or actions to God that are contrary to that which has been revealed elsewhere. And yet, the parable is about God. In fact, Jesus says at the very end in Matthew 18:35, “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

There is a seriousness that Jesus brings with this parable. There is that great forgiveness His Father brings but there is also that appropriate fear that a servant has for his master. Psalm 103 also emphasizes this relationship. David is rejoicing in the mercy, grace, and patience of God. He acknowledges that in God’s grace “He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities” (Psalm 103:10). And yet, even in the same breath of speaking of the mercy and tenderness of God, David says, “go great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him” (v. 11). And as he speaks of how God has removed our transgressions from us “as far as the east is from the west” (v. 12), he also reminds us that “the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him” (v. 13).

There is that proper fear of a servant toward his master as even there should be from men to the Lord. That fear certainly is a reverence for who God is but neither should this be lightened and drained of all its weight. A proper fear of God also includes the healthy acknowledgement that before an all-holy God we stand in judgment. Many have trouble with this parable because the king is a judging king and therefore the analogy would be that God is a God who judges. But this is part of the very purpose of the parable. There is a reason to fear God and His judgment. It is those who acknowledge that they should fear God who flee to Him for refuge! As was stated earlier, those who are well have no need of a physician.

The first part of the parable says that the servant owed “ten thousand talents” (Matthew 18:24). Jesus says this to

communicate that the amount owed was incalculable. It was beyond ever paying back. A talent in New Testament times was about twenty years of wages for a laborer. If one were to calculate that in to today’s terms, it would be roughly six billion dollars. While our government officials may think that’s a “drop in the bucket”, six billion dollars is light-years beyond what any of us could pay in a lifetime. That’s Jesus’ point. The debt cannot be paid.

The amount the king forgives is enormous. And yet, the one the king forgave then went out and tried to exact from his fellow servant the debt that he owed to him. And that debt was about 100 days of wages. It didn’t compare to what he owed his king. And even exacting the amount owed to him wouldn’t make any difference in canceling his debt to the king. His desire wasn’t to try to repay the king in grateful response to what had been done for him. He wanted from his fellow worker that which he could get for himself. And when that fellow worker couldn’t pay he had him thrown into prison. No grace shown. No mercy shown. No patience. No forgiveness. So the king finds out and is very angry that the grace shown to the servant wasn’t reciprocated to his fellow worker. The king then had the servant thrown in jail until he could pay his debt.

It’s important here in this parable to remember the purpose of the parable. It is not teaching us a comprehensive theology. It is not where we get our understanding of the perseverance or preservation of the saints. The point of the parable is that even as God has forgiven you (an incalculable debt), you are also to forgive others. Here we have the reality of kingdom living. There are responsibilities of living in the kingdom. There is fruit that is produced from those whose hearts have been changed by God. Is it not what John teaches? “Beloved, if God loved us, we also ought to love one another” (I John 4:11). Is it not what Paul teaches?

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“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).

It may seem that this parable teaches more about the judgment of God against those who do not forgive than it does about His own forgiveness. While it is true that the climax and the explanation certainly points out God’s judgment, do not forget the beginning of the parable. This has been pointed out, but as this lesson closes, it is good to be reminded.

In Matthew 18:23 when Jesus introduces the parable he says, “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared...” That is a good translation but some of the emphasis may be lost because that comparison may be past, present, or future. Jesus uses here what’s called an aorist passive for a word that we translate, “may be compared.” A rougher translation would be “has become like.” This emphasizes the present nature of the kingdom. Just like in the Parable of the Two Debtors, Jesus is announcing that forgiveness has come in His ministry. The forgiveness and liberty foretold by the prophets is being dispensed in the here and now. And at the beginning of the parable, the breadth and depth and width and height of that reality is shown forth. The king forgave an incalculable debt! This is what God has done for us in Christ Jesus!

And now, even as God has done for us, because He has done for us, now go and do unto others. As Klyne Snodgrass says in “Stories with Intent,” “The kingdom comes with limitless grace in the midst of an evil world, but with it comes limitless demand.”

We are being taught here even as Paul and other authors teach, that we are to live in a manner worthy of our calling. As Jesus told the twelve, “You received without paying; give without pay” (Matthew 10:8).

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