



## The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

### The King's forgiveness

**"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.**

**"At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go" (Matthew 18:23–27).**

There's a story found in the Bible that I think many of us can relate to. It's found in Matthew's biography of the life of Jesus Christ. Here's how the story goes:

There was a man who owed a whole lot of money. I am sure he wasn't surprised when he was finally summoned to see the king. He got cleaned up, left his modest home, traveled across the province until he reached the sprawling palace of the great king. Once on the palace grounds, he was ushered through the outside iron gate, past the lush green gardens, up the stone stairs, through the large mahogany double doors, past the sprawling library, and into the inner chambers of the mighty king. The room was absolutely breathtaking. Beautiful marble floors were elegantly covered with beautiful hand woven rugs. Richly colored tapestries hung graciously down the wall. It seemed that every piece of furniture was inlaid with gold and costly stones. There the man stood, anxiously waiting for the king to make his appearance.

The king finally enters the room and everyone bows dutifully until he is seated on his impressive throne. An aide carrying an old ledger opens it to the page where this man's name appears in the upper right hand corner and presents it to the king. The king looks at the bottom-line on the ledger sheet and looks up saying,

"Servant, it says here that you owe me a lot of money."

"Yes, your majesty," the servant says very nervously.

"You owe me 10,000 bags of gold."

"Yes, that is true, your majesty."

"I want my money."

"Yes, your majesty."

"I want my money **now**."

"Umm, why yes, I mean no. Uh, your majesty, I don't have your money."

The aide leans over to the king and they discuss plans to sell the man, his wife, and children into slavery. They also plan to sell whatever personal property the servant owned to recoup what little they could of this enormous debt. The decision has been made. But, when the king turns around, he finds the servant down on the carpet, trembling on his knees. Looking up at the king, with his entire body shaking and tears in his eyes, he begs, "Please have mercy on me and I will pay back everything little by little, please!"

The king was deeply moved by the servant's plea for mercy and had great compassion on him. Shocking the entire court, the king reached into the ledger book, took hold of a page and tore it out. He then ripped the page with the servant's debt into tiny pieces. He turned to the servant who was still trembling with fear and on his knees and said, "I forgive you the debt. You are now free and clear. Go in peace my child."

Wow! What a great story! Can you imagine what must have been going through the mind of the servant at this point? His greatest fear is erased in a moment and he is flooded with tears of joy. His heart swelled with such relief and gratitude as he ran out of the chambers a free and grateful man. His enormous debt to the king had been forgiven in a single moment. What mercy, what grace, what freedom! Ah, but that is not how the story ends.

### The servant's refusal to forgive

**"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.**

**"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.'**

**"But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt" (verses 28–30).**

Matthew's account in chapter 18 tells us that as the servant left the palace, he soon bumps into a friend, another servant, who owes him a hundred silver coins, which is worth \$20 today. In

that day, an average servant earned roughly \$80 per year. \$20 was about three months' wages. In contrast, the king was owed 10,000 bags of gold, which is about \$10 million today. So the servant who had just been forgiven a debt of \$10 million grabs a guy who owes him \$20 by the neck and begins to choke the life out of him, demanding to be repaid.

In a similar fashion, the other servant gets on his knees and begs for mercy and for more time to repay the debt. Unbelievably, his request was refused. Palace guards were summoned at once and the frightened man was thrown into prison until he could repay the debt. Satisfied that justice had been served, the servant heads to the nearest pub to celebrate his new found freedom and success. But, before the glass could touch his lips, he is grabbed by the same palace guards and dragged back to see the king. What the servant didn't realize is several other servants of the king saw the whole ordeal. They were watching from a distance and were outraged by this man's actions and went immediately to tell the king the news.

### The response of the King

**"When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.**

**"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.**

**"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart" (verses 31–35).**

Kicking and screaming the servant is thrown down at the feet of the king again. Standing over the servant, this time with fire in his eyes and anger in his voice he says, "You wicked servant! I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you? Your actions are pathetic. Get this man out of my sight. Throw him in the same cell with the other servant who owes him \$20. We'll see how that works out!"

Jesus ends the story with one explanation, **"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother and sister from your heart"** (Matt. 18:35).

### Jesus is Forgiveness

This story puts a bad taste in my mouth. That's until I realize that I am the servant in the story and so are you. We owe God a great debt that cannot be repaid. Even if you have a net worth of \$10 million you could never pay the debt you owe to God. When Jesus told this story, the original hearers would have laughed at the sum the first servant owed the king. Nobody could owe \$10

million during the time Jesus lived. It was a ridiculous amount of money.

Why then would Jesus say that somebody owed that much money? I call this a ridiculous comparison. Here's the point—when it comes to paying the debt of sin, what we owe to God, there is not enough good deeds in all the world to pay it. Only the sinless sacrifice of God himself could forgive our debt. God's forgiveness costs us nothing, because it cost Jesus Christ everything, even his life. Our enormous debt was paid in full by Jesus when he suffered and died on a cross for our sins and in our place. That is the good news! Our debt has been paid!

But, what was the servant's problem? Why wasn't he able to forgive his friend's small debt? I think it's a number of things. The servant had never fully received the gracious forgiveness offered by the king. His heart was hardened by pride and ego. He never came to grips with just how broken and sinful he was. He actually believed he could repay the entire debt if he just had more time! That's what he said! But, it would have taken him 164,000 years to repay the debt. That's how arrogant and clueless this man was.

Isn't the same true for some of us today? People frequently reject king Jesus' offer of forgiveness. Why? Because we've all been raised to believe that we shouldn't take anything from anybody. Everyone's got to pull his or her own weight. We are told from birth you can do anything in this life if you just work hard enough at it and go for it. Pull yourself up from your own boot straps. God helps those who help themselves. It's the American way. But, it's not God's way. God's way says, **"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up"** (James 4:10).

You and I owe God a great debt that we can never pay back. Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our debt has been paid in full. By faith, you receive God's forgiveness and at that moment, your debt in God's ledger is ripped up. Listen to these powerful words from the Prophet Isaiah, **"Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool"** (Isaiah 1:18). If you are not yet a follower of Jesus Christ this morning, maybe today is the day for you to fully receive God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

### You Must Forgive Others

There's another side of this story we have to consider. Once we come to understand Jesus is forgiveness, once we embrace him and are overwhelmed by him, in love and obedience we must forgive others. Without God's forgiveness it's almost impossible to truly forgive others who've wronged you. Like Chris, deep down we hold onto those hurts and pains as a way of self protection. When we learn to forgive others, so many of life's problems get settled. If we can keep in perspective how much God forgave us, and how much it cost him to forgive, we will soon see that no sin against us can ever justify an unforgiving spirit.

It's no mistake that this story is sandwiched between a passage about how to deal with people who have sinned against you and a passage about divorce. In both cases forgiveness is hard. It's no wonder Jesus taught us to pray, "*forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us.*" Even as Jesus was suffering the agony of crucifixion he looked at those who crucified him and said, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" Like the unmerciful servant, when we choose to withhold forgiveness, our actions insult the king who has wonderfully forgiven us. The servant's behavior is so appalling that any reasonable person is shocked to see his response to the other servant. That's exactly the point Jesus wanted to make—forgiveness not shown is forgiveness not known. Once you experience the forgiveness of God, you are compelled to give it out. God's forgiving is a model of our forgiving. God shows us the way.

If this is what God wants from us, then why is forgiveness so hard? For one, our reluctance to forgive others can stem from us not truly understanding and receiving fully God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ. We may understand it in our head but it hasn't trickled down to our hearts. One of the defining marks of a true follower of Jesus is coming to embrace Jesus and his forgiveness. Once you understand and have received the forgiveness of Jesus, you have the power to give forgiveness to others.

I think another reason we choose to withhold forgiveness is because some of us have been greatly sinned against. Like Chris, many of us have gone through very painful circumstances and the idea of forgiving that person seems impossible. I am not saying forgiveness is an easy business; it is not. It is hard and painful work. It can take years and many tough conversations. We also have to exercise discernment and wisdom when we offer or receive forgiveness. Forgiveness doesn't require a close relationship with that person. It doesn't mean that you'll forget the offense either. But, I believe forgiveness is always possible. Maybe my story will help.

I didn't grow up in a Christian home. My father left us when I was three. My mom and dad battled heroin addiction most of their adult lives. I've had five stepfathers, only one which I liked. My grandparents helped raise us as my mom went in and out of recovery programs. I've been on welfare, lived in a homeless shelter, and have seen some terrible things in my life.

At the age of 17, I began to wonder about my purpose in life and if there was a God. Some guys on my football team invited me to a youth rally at a large church in Castro Valley. It was there that I heard that Gospel for the first time. I wasn't a bad kid, but I certainly did things I was not proud of. No one had to tell me I was a sinner; I knew that I was. When I heard that Jesus could forgive me, give me a new life filled with purpose and meaning, and be my heavenly father, I was overjoyed. With tears in my

eyes I surrendered my life to Jesus and put my faith in him. I was a changed man.

After earning a business degree at the University of San Francisco, and having to choose between a dozen job offers, I finally thought that I had made it. But, my youth pastor, Bret Johnson, was moving to Las Vegas to start a new church and he asked me to go with him and be the youth pastor. I sensed God calling me to do that and moved to Las Vegas in the summer of 2000. We planted a new church and it got off to a great start. God was at work and lives where being changed. I soon met my wife Missy and we got married.

It was at that point I realized before I got married, I should do some work on my inner life. I began to meet with a Christian counselor and by the second meeting I was in tears about not having a father to guide, protect and provide for me. The counselor helped me to see God's grace all over my life and it was there that I finally was able to forgive my dad in my heart. I then decided to find him. It was easier than I thought! Once I knew he was in prison, I was able to locate him quickly. I immediately sent him a letter.

For five years we wrote back and forth. During that time I moved back to the San Francisco Bay Area, we had another child, and life went on. My wife would often ask me why I haven't visited my dad, and I would tell her I just wasn't ready. Then something interesting happened all in one week—three different men challenged me to go and visit my father. I couldn't believe it. My wife always says that if you hear something three times, it's usually the Lord speaking! I randomly put a date on the calendar—Saturday February 18, 2012. I called my brother and to my surprise, he wanted to join me.

The 3-hour drive to Coalinga was harder than I expected. I was a nervous wreck. Once at the prison, I met up with my brother who made the 6-hour drive from Las Vegas. After getting processed and brought into a waiting room, the time had finally come. My dad, who had no idea we were coming, walked through the prison doors, and for the first time in over 30+ years I got to talk with my father face to face. It was incredible. I wish Oprah was there!

My dad is serving a 25-year-to-life sentence because of the three strikes law in California. Even though he is a nonviolent offender and all his crimes were drug related, his first parole hearing isn't until 2018. He hadn't had a visitor in seven years. He was shocked to see us. We talked for three hours and the time flew by.

Here's why I am telling you this story. Early on in our conversation my brother and I looked at him right in the eye I said, "Dad, I completely forgive you. I have no bitterness in my heart whatsoever against you." With tears in his eyes, he said thank you and told us how hard it is for him to deal with his emotions and how guilt has plagued him his entire life.

That one sentence set both my dad and me free. I left the prison and drove home feeling such a sense of peace that finally, this chapter of my life had been addressed. I'm grateful that Jesus has forgiven my sins and I was finally able to forgive my father's. But, it was hard, it took time, and the Lord had to do a lot of work in my own heart in preparation.

I am convinced the reason many people suffer from stress, depression, discouragement, relationship problems, and all sorts of other hardships experience those things because of a refusal to forgive. Forgiveness from the heart liberates both parties involved and it honors the King in the process. It may seem humanly impossible to forgive someone who has deeply wounded you. But, it is more than possible for redeemed people, under the power of the Holy Spirit, to forgive even the most serious offenses.

One pastor wrote, "Forgiveness is, very simply, a miracle. It is a miracle of a new beginning; starting again from where you are, not where you wish you were. When you truly forgive someone, you hold out your hand and say, 'I cannot excuse what you've done. I cannot understand what you've done. I cannot forget what you've done. But, I want to be your friend again. I want to be your husband again. I want to be your father again. Let's start again.'" There are some of you today that need to embrace Jesus, receive his forgiveness and start again. There are others here who need to forgive someone. Whoever that person is you need to forgive. Ask the Lord to help you so you can start again.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

© 2013 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA  
Catalog No. 1389