

## **Series Kingdom Parables**

### **This Message The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant**

#### **Scripture Matthew 18:21-35**

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus described the attitudes and behaviors of people who were authentic members of the kingdom of heaven. The typical person who was listening to Jesus would have considered His descriptions of the kingdom lifestyle to be radical and unrealistic. They did not believe that a person could live on earth according to the standards that Jesus was teaching. Although the religious leaders had their reputation for keeping the law, Jesus said that the righteousness of kingdom people had to exceed that of Israel's leaders. This statement and other such statements made the kingdom lifestyle seem impossible, beyond the reach of people, so they thought. However, when Jesus was alone with His disciples, He made it clear to them that He expected them to live according to the high heavenly standards He had been teaching, and He continuously challenged their thinking in His efforts to shape their understanding.

In Matthew's Gospel, the first of the parables of Jesus are recorded in the thirteenth chapter. The parables were story-illustrations of various aspects of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus knew that His disciples, like all other Jews, had been greatly influenced by the Old Testament law, and, in particular, influenced by the twisted and distorted interpretations of the law by the religious leaders. It was necessary for Jesus to get His listeners to focus on the original meanings and purposes of God. It was necessary for the disciples to adopt the attitudes and behaviors of kingdom people. It was necessary for the disciples to have an understanding of how the kingdom would advance and grow on the earth and about the events of the end of the age.

By the end of chapter 13, Jesus' disciples had already been given a great deal of information about the perseverance they would need in order to live righteously in the midst of evil surroundings, and information about the quality of their lifestyles. They were to be like salt and light in the midst of an evil world. They were also given information about their ministry activities. They were to provide blessings for others out of the storeroom of spiritual treasures they were being given.

The next significant parable about the kingdom of heaven is in chapter 18. Before we read this parable, I want to mention the context. Earlier in chapter 18, Jesus had given instructions to the disciples about what to do “if your brother sins against you” (*Matthew 18:15*). Those instructions triggered a question in Peter’s mind, and this was the basis of the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant.

### **Read Matthew 18:21-35**

Peter and the other disciples knew that the Old Testament law demanded forgiveness and mercy to others. They also knew the Jewish traditions about this topic. According to some teachers of the law, a fellow Jew could be forgiven for a repeated sin only three times. According to the teachers, if there was a fourth occurrence of the sin, no forgiveness should be given because the fourth occurrence would be proof that the person was not sincere about changing his behavior. The religious teachers wanted to limit the number of times that they would extend mercy to errant Jews because they felt that “unlimited mercy would encourage a life of sin.”

Peter may have thought he was being generous by volunteering to go as high as seven times of forgiveness. That was more than double what the rabbis would allow. Jesus’ answer to Peter’s question would have shocked the disciples. “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” (*Some translations read “seventy times seven,” but there is debate about the correctness of that number.*) Whatever the number, Jesus was essentially saying, “You must forgive an unlimited number of times. You must always be ready to show mercy to your brothers.”

According to Jesus, a spirit of willingness to forgive others was not compatible with calculations about bad behavior. There are other passages in the New Testament which state the same truth. For example, the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Church in Corinth, “Love is patient, love is kind, ... love keeps no record of wrongs” (*I Corinthians 13:4-5*).

Jesus knew that His response to Peter was another of the incredibly shocking truths that He had been sharing with His disciples in order to reorient their thinking. In order to illustrate the reasons why kingdom people must maintain a constant attitude of forgiveness and mercy, Jesus resorted to a parable-illustration.

The parable can be divided into three sections. In the first section, Jesus described the circumstances of a servant who could not settle his account with the king. This servant owed the astonishing sum of ten thousand talents. The talent was the largest denomination in the money system, and Jesus was using the unimaginable amount of ten thousand to emphasize the point He was going to make.

We can get a sense of the size of this servant's debt by comparing it to a real world amount. According to historical records, the total annual revenue received by Herod the Great, the political leader of Israel at the time of the birth of Jesus, was about nine hundred talents [*Josephus, Antiquities 17:318-20*]. Some of this money was used to finance the great building projects initiated by Herod. The servant in Jesus' story owed more than ten times Herod's annual income, clearly an astonishing amount. In fact, ten thousand talents represented far more money than existed in circulation in Israel.

Because the servant was unable to pay, the king pronounced judgment: He, his wife, his children, and all his possessions would be sold. And so, guilty, without resources to pay the debt, without hope of ever being free again, the servant could only fall on his knees before the king and beg for mercy.

Verse 27 indicates that the king, in response to the servant's appeal for mercy, took pity on him, canceled the debt and released him from punishment. The king granted the servant more than had been requested. The servant had begged for patience and time, but he received complete exoneration from guilt and blame. In view of the loss of resources incurred by the king, the disciples could understand that the acquittal was an incredible act of mercy and forgiveness.

The second section of the story was parallel to the first, but in this section, the emphasis is not on compassion but the callousness of the man who had been forgiven. After this acquitted servant left the presence of the king, he encountered an individual who owed him a small amount of money. A denarius represented the wages of a common laborer for one day's work. A hundred denarii would therefore be a significant amount for a common laborer, but it would be just an infinitesimal amount compared to ten thousand talents.

The words of the second servant were the same as the words spoken to the king. Although he begged for mercy, and there was the realistic expectation that the debt would be repaid, the first servant was obstinately unmerciful. Instead of treating others as he had been treated, the first servant had the second individual thrown into prison. The man who had been forgiven was the embodiment of ingratitude and insensitivity.

The main point of the parable is revealed in the third section. After the king learned about the despicable behavior of the first servant, he was appalled and justifiably angry. The main point of the parable is in verse 33, where the king asks, "Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" The servant had obviously not shown any mercy. Therefore he was declared to be "wicked" and turned over to the jailers to be tortured.

There are a lot of spiritual truths which come from this parable. First of all, let's relate the parable to Peter's original question, "How many times shall I forgive my brother?" Jesus had earlier said, in essence, "You must be willing to forgive an unlimited number of times." Verse 33 adds another dimension to this truth: "You must have mercy on others just as you have been shown mercy." We can also paraphrase verse 33 another way: "You must show mercy to others to the extent you have yourself experienced mercy." As Peter learned from the parable, such an attitude cannot be measured or counted. It simply flows out from an overwhelming experience of undeserved love, mercy and forgiveness.

Extraordinary mercy and compassion had been extended to the first servant in the parable, and the king expected him, in turn, to act in accordance with the mercy he had received. Every person who has received forgiveness and mercy should be able to sympathize with and have compassion toward others who are themselves in need of forgiveness and mercy. The sense of gratitude and relief in the person who has been acquitted from judgment should, by itself, bring about a drastic change in the person's attitude.

Looking at this parable from another standpoint, we realize that it fits in perfectly with Jesus' teaching on the Sermon on the Mount, and reinforces the previous teaching. In the Beatitudes, Jesus described the characteristics of individuals who had become members of the kingdom of heaven. He said that kingdom people were beggars. They recognized that they had no personal righteous assets to offer their heavenly king — nothing to cover the debt of their sin and guilt. Because they had no resources of their own, they were dependent on the mercy of God. Without forgiveness, they would face judgment.

In the second beatitude, Jesus described “those who mourn.” According to Jesus, mourning is associated with begging. It is a plea that conditions might be changed and become better. Jesus promised that the people who beg and mourn “will be comforted” and that the comfort would come from God’s mercy.

There was yet another beatitude which spoke directly about mercy. Mercy can be defined as love extended to people because of their miserable, helpless, and needy condition. Mercy is love focused on the hurts and needs of others. Although God was not specifically mentioned in the parable, I think we recognize that the king represented God. The obvious lesson is, therefore, that people should be merciful to others after God has shown mercy to them.

There is a link between mercy and forgiveness in the Sermon on the Mount. This parable also emphasizes this link. Forgiveness is a form of mercy extended to the person who is without the resources to meet an obligation, whether it is financial or spiritual. Forgiveness can be a costly form of mercy. It requires one party to absorb the consequences of someone else’s behavior.

In the parable, forgiving the financial debt was obviously costly to the king — he lost a considerable sum of money. Looked at from a spiritual standpoint, our sins required God to absorb another kind of cost. The Father gave His Son, and the Son gave His life. It was through the death of Jesus that our sins were forgiven, even though we were guilty and did not deserve the mercy we received.

Our sins represent an unfathomable debt against an infinitely holy God, but He mercifully responds to all who acknowledge their guilt and cast themselves on Him. His nature as a loving, compassionate, Father requires Him to act mercifully toward guilty, destitute, spiritual beggars.

In the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, after Jesus gave the model prayer to His listeners, He added, “If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (*Matthew 6:14-15*). The parable illustrates this truth.

In light of the unconditional and unlimited forgiveness of sins extended to us by God, we, as kingdom people, have the responsibility to be merciful to those who sin against us. As humans we not infrequently become involved with individuals and in situations in which we are cheated, insulted, injured, and otherwise treated unjustly. What is our reaction? Do we think and then act mercifully in those situations? Or are we sometimes like the unmerciful servant, who took his debtor by the throat and demanded restitution?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructed His listeners to “Not resist an evil person” (*Matthew 5:39*). Actions which are the opposite of resistance get us into the area of mercy and forgiveness. Jesus explained, “If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.” Jesus also said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” and He said that, if we did this, it would be proof that we “are the children of the Father in heaven” (*Matthew 5:39-45*).

Human offenses against us are insignificant compared to our offenses against our holy God. Looking at this from another standpoint, the mercy and forgiveness we extend to those who sin against us is insignificant compared to the quality of the mercy and forgiveness given to us by God. The question we need to ask ourselves is, “To what extent do I value and appreciate the magnitude of God’s mercy to me?” The wicked servant had zero appreciation of what the king had done for him. In contrast, if we have even a little appreciation of the magnitude of God’s mercy to us, then we must be willing to show mercy to others.

Let me point out one more truth which comes from this parable. The same God who was willing to be so magnanimous in His forgiveness was also indignant and ruthless in His punishment of the wicked servant. In our earthly ways of thinking, these two attributes might not seem to be compatible. However, Scripture makes it clear that mercy and justice are both essential and equal attributes of God. Scripture does not teach that mercy eliminates justice, nor does it teach that justice nullifies mercy. The two are equally valid norms.

In the Old Testament law, both justice and mercy had to be operative and functional in society. The reason was that the law was a reflection of God's ways, and God displays both attributes in His dealings with people. God called attention to these attributes when He interacted with Moses on Mount Sinai. As God passed in front of Moses, He proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin. Yet, he does not leave the guilty unpunished" (*Exodus 34:6-7*). God revealed Himself as the God of both mercy and justice.

This parable in Matthew chapter 18 illustrates the mercy and justice of God. God was quick to forgive the servant rather than apply strict justice. The servant, however, applied the principle of justice without any hint of mercy. That's what got him in trouble. What the servant had done to his debtor, the king did to him. By his actions, the servant condemned himself, and justice was administered by the king without mercy. Scripture indicates that the basis of God's judgment at the end of the age is our own actions.

Jesus concluded the parable with a straight-forward warning: "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

A few years later, the writer James restated that truth, "Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful" (*James 2:13*).

The Psalmist wrote, "If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O LORD, who could stand?" Then the Psalmist expressed the basis of our hope, "But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are honored and esteemed" (*Psalms 130:3-4*).

The Apostle Paul instructed us to, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you" (*Ephesians 4:32*).

**Extra thought**

The laws of our country describe in great detail behaviors which are unacceptable in the eyes of society and the penalties for engaging in those behaviors. Yes, there are provisions in our systems of justice for mercy and leniency, but we typically feel that the granting of mercy should be exceptional and rare. For the most part, we believe that justice must be applied rigorously in all situations, and that mercy, when it is demonstrated, represents the temporary suspension of justice. For the most part, we consider the punishments which are handed out for breaking the laws to be justified and fair. Is this an acceptable attitude for the followers of Jesus?