



1

The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant –
Matt 18:21-35

- Could also be called the Parable of the Two Debtors like last week, but the two are very different in context and message.
- Like the Parable of the Two Debtors, this one comes out of a “teachable moment.”
- The parable is occasioned by a question from Peter. He is looking for a clarification of Scripture.
- Peter’s question: When have you forgiven someone often enough? What’s the limit to forgiveness?

2

A Request for Interpretation

- Peter’s question is known in Hebrew as a question of “Halacha”. From Scripture he knows he is to forgive, but it doesn’t tell us how many times. When is it too much?
- Jesus’ answer: “77 times” or, “as often as necessary”
- The “Bet Din” – the court of three that handles these types of questions.

3

The "Bet Din"

- The procedure of "Matt 18:15-20" is the Bet Din in action.
- Each community had a court of three. There was also a court of 7 under it that handled more minor issues. When one had a conflict with another, the offended is called upon to forgive. If not resolved, they would go to court – the "Bet Din". When two of the three agreed, you had your ruling.
- Based on Ex. 18, when Moses divided his duties as judge of the people.

4

The "Bet Din"

- In Acts 6 we are told of a dispute among the Christians regarding the distribution of food. The "Bet Din" was Peter, James and John. They referred it to the court of 7 to handle.
- Paul says in 1 Cor. 6 that if two believers take each other to court, you have already been defeated. Let the matter be handled in the church, not in the civil courts. (1 Cor. 6:7).
- So Peter is going to the head of his "Bet Din". Peter wants to know "what is the ruling?" How many times?

5

"77 Times"

- To forgive 7 times is pretty generous. But 77 times?
- Jesus answer comes from Scripture. Gen 4:23-24. Lamech was known as the most evil person on earth. He is evil incarnate. His wrath is seven-fold. But in Jesus' kingdom everything is reversed. We should forgive as often as Lamech sought revenge!
- 77 times or 70 times? Different translations. But it is hyperbole. Forgive as often as it is asked of us.

6

The Parable – Forgive freely

- “The Kingdom is like . . .”
- The King comes to balance his books. The debt is enormous, like the national debt. Jesus again uses hyperbole. The debt is impossible.
- The man begging for more time is to make you laugh.
- The king forgives the debt!
- The man finds someone who owes him \$1000 – big, but payable. Again, Jesus uses extreme contrast. The reality is somewhere in between the extremes.

7

The Parable – Forgive freely

- The forgiven servant demands immediate payment from his fellow servant. He refuses to extend the same mercy he has received.
- The king revokes the forgiveness. The man is arrested until he pays the debt, which would be forever.
- God will do the same to you if you do not forgive your brother – 18:35
- Law and Gospel – I know I must forgive. But it’s a struggle. God’s grace comes to us in the midst of our struggle, not after it.

8

Two Dimensions

- The “national debt” is like our relationship to God – the vertical dimension. We cannot possibly pay back all that we owe God.
- The horizontal dimension are the sins we commit against one another. Here we can and most certainly should pay back our debts.
- Jesus connects the vertical and the horizontal. How do you love our great God? By loving your neighbor as yourself.
- Literally: “Love your neighbor who is you.”

9

Money is the metaphor for the debt of sin

- The King = God
- The servant who owes the national debt = our vertical relationship to God. He is the penitent, who also harbors resentment towards others. Even though we are forgiven by God, we have trouble forgiving others.
- Cancelling the debt = atonement or forgiveness
- The second debt = the horizontal relationship to one another.

10

The Big Challenge

- The Kingdom of God is not about your justification, but about your sanctification – your life after you are saved. How do you live life as a child of God?
- The rub of this parable: If we don't forgive, God won't forgive us. That's a tough statement.
- But if we know this, if we are struggling with it, that's good.
- We struggle forgiving people. The only way to handle it is to go to Christ.

11

The Days of Awe

- The Gospel does not mention the time of year, but from Hebrew we know exactly when.
- The 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are known as "the Days of Awe". During that time you are called upon to forgive one another.
- In Rosh Hashanah, the king comes and open his books. He is giving the people 10 days to settle accounts. The verdict comes on Yom Kippur. This is what is on Peter's mind because it is time to offer forgiveness.

12

What does this mean?

- We need to identify with both actors on the stage. Each individual seeks forgiveness from God for our colossal debt.
- But the real question: to what extent do you love your neighbor as yourself?
- To what extent do we forgive others? Are we willing to be wrong, to let it go, for the sake of harmony in the community?
