

THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT

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Lesson: Matthew 18:21-35.

The Lord had been asked by the disciple Peter how often he should forgive anyone who had done some harm to him. Should he forgive him seven times, and after that be unforgiving and harsh towards him? The Lord replied in two ways: first, by saying directly that we should forgive people seventy times seven times, in other words, we should *always* forgive anyone who does us any harm; and secondly, He replied with a parable, an earthly story with a heavenly meaning about forgiveness.

The story was about a certain king who found that one of his servants owed him a huge sum of money—ten thousand talents. The servant had no money for paying the debt. He couldn't possibly pay it at once; so the king ordered the servant to be sold as a slave, together with his wife and children; and everything that he possessed was to be sold also, so that the debt could be paid.

The poor servant was in a desperate position. He didn't have the money and he didn't want his family sold as slaves. All he could do was to beg for mercy; to ask his master the king to give him more time to save up the money, and he promised very earnestly that he would then be able to pay the debt of money. He said, "Have patience with me and I will pay you all" (Matthew 18:26).

The king was moved with compassion when he saw the poor man on his knees before him, begging for mercy. He took pity on him, and changed his mind. He forgave him the whole debt. He told him he did not have to pay any money at all. As you can well imagine, this was a very great relief to the poor servant.

But when this servant had gone out from the king after being treated so mercifully, he did a very strange thing. You would expect him to be kind and merciful and forgiving towards others, since *he* had been treated so mercifully by the king. But no! To everyone's dismay, he began to act harshly and cruelly towards one of his fellow—servants, towards another servant of the king, another servant like himself, who owed him some money. It was only a small amount of money. It was only a hundred pennies. It was nothing compared with those ten thousand talents, which the king had forgiven the man. But still he was determined to get it from his fellow servant. He seized him by the throat, and said to him: "Pay me what you owe me!"

Now, this fellow servant had no more hope of paying the money at once than the servant who was demanding it had when the king had asked him to. Even though the amount involved was only small, he was in just as hopeless a position as the other man had been. So all he could do was to fall down on his knees at the feet of the harsh servant who was demanding the money, and beg him to give him more time to pay, more time to save up the money. He said the very same words as the other servant had said in the presence of the king, "Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all."

But he would not. He refused to show him any mercy at all although he had received great mercy from the king. He was harsh and heartless.

Then the other servants heard about it, and were very sorry about what that cruel servant had done. They thought it was most unfair, so they went to the king to tell him about it.

The king immediately summoned the harsh, ungrateful servant, because he was very angry with him, and he said to him: "You are a wicked servant. I forgave you all that debt, because you wanted me to do so. Shouldn't you also have had compassion on your fellow servant just as I had pity on you?" Of course, there was no answer. The servant had no excuse; he had acted inexcusably. So the king had the cruel, unmerciful servant put into prison until he had paid off the whole debt.

Now, that unmerciful servant did not treat others as he would like to be treated himself. He was not obeying the Golden Rule—which is to treat others as we want them to treat us. He wanted to *receive* mercy, but he wasn't willing to *give* mercy to others. This is against the Lord's law. For the Lord said, "Happy [or blessed] are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy" (Matthew 5:7) You see *only* the merciful can receive mercy. Only if we are forgiving can we ourselves be forgiven. That is why the Lord taught us to say in His Prayer, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." That is why that is the one petition that was repeated by the Lord after He concluded the Prayer. He added, "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6: 12, 14-15). That is why also the Lord in concluding His parable about forgiveness, said that our Heavenly Father would have to treat us like the unforgiving servant if we did not "from our hearts" forgive anyone his trespasses, that is, forgive him for any harmful things he does to us.

That phrase "from your hearts" is important. You know, sometimes people say: "I can forgive but I cannot forget." But that is impossible. It is impossible to forgive if we still have lingering in our minds, in our memory, any feelings of resentment, or anger, or revenge against anyone who has hurt us, if we continually bear a grudge against him or her. We are not really forgiving if we are like that. We may *say* that we forgive them; but we are not really forgiving

them in our hearts.

You see, if we cling to those hard feelings of hatred against anyone, if we are unwilling to let them go, the Lord cannot take them away, which is the same thing as forgiving them. That is the meaning of forgiving—taking away what is evil, harsh, cruel and unmerciful. If we cling to evil feelings like that, the Lord cannot take them away or forgive them. That is why the Lord urged us to forgive anyone who trespasses against us, that is, who hurts us or is nasty to us. Otherwise we cannot be forgiven by the Lord.

Let us then always make a great effort to be merciful and forgiving. Let's not fall into the habit of treating others as they treat us; being kind and friendly to them only if they are kind and friendly to us, and being nasty and hateful to them if they treat us badly. That is the way of the world. That is what they are all like in hell. No. Let's try to be as the Lord would have us be. Let us treat others, not as they treat us, but as we would *like* them to treat us. "As ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise" (Luke 6:31).
Amen.