

**QUESTION #19: “WHAT IS MERCY —
WHY IS IT SO EASY TO WANT BUT SO DIFFICULT TO GIVE?”
(Matthew 18:21-35)**

9.29.19

INTRODUCTION

Today’s question is a really interesting one, because it comes with a sub-question. The main question? “What is mercy.” The sub-question: “Why is mercy so easy to want but so difficult to give?” Great questions, and tough, probing questions for us to consider. But that’s what we’re going to be looking at today, so let’s get right to it. And to really get into it, we need to see this parable in the context of what is happening in the moments where this parable came to life.

At this point, Jesus is in the final weeks of his earthly ministry, so everything he talks about with his disciples has a sense of urgency — not just because his time on earth is becoming shorter, but also because these are the things he most wants to emphasize to them as being part of the life of a citizen member of the kingdom of God. Matthew 18 brings the disciples some great things to focus on:

- 1) In Matthew 18:1-9, the focus is on the definition of greatness in the kingdom of God. He uses a child to illustrate how he sees greatness: Humility. A little child’s place in the world is a reflection of the humility and lowliness that Christ expects of his followers.
- 2) In Matthew 18:10-14, Jesus uses the illustration of a single lost sheep and a shepherd’s desire to find it to reflect the passion citizens in the kingdom of God should have for all believers — particularly on new believers, but on all believers by extension. Christ’s passion for us should be reflected in our passion for each other, especially our passion and concern for each one’s spiritual life.
- 3) In Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus looks at how to deal with sin in the community of believers, and the sequence of dealing with the person or people involved. As always, the desired outcome is reconciliation and restoration vs. retribution.
- 4) And now, in this final section of Matthew 18, Jesus moves on from the idea of church discipline, that is, what somebody else has done, to what should I be doing? Jesus always wanted his lessons to be taken personally by his disciples, because it was the person that they were that Jesus desired to change into the Christian servant they could be.

TEXT (Matthew 18:21-35)

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times” — Matthew 18:21-22.

- 1) Peter is doing what many people try to do: put a limit on their obligations and responsibilities, usually wanting to make that limit as easy as possible. It is the same thing an “expert in the law” tried to do with Jesus when wanting to know who actually qualified as his “neighbor”; Jesus’ reply was the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).
- 2) Rabbinic teaching of the time did in fact teach that people should forgive those who had offended them — but only three times was prescribed as being sufficient. Peter’s offering seven times as a good number suggests that he saw himself as doing more than was required, and therefore more than fulfilling the requirements of the law.
- 3) The numbers Peter and Jesus use are multiples of the number “7,” which in the Jewish culture signified completeness. Whereas Peter’s idea of “7” times suggests the bare minimum, Jesus’ number of “77” (other translations suggest “seventy times seven”)

suggests, by means of hyperbole (exaggeration), the exact opposite, meaning there should be no limit on forgiveness, nor is the number of times we offer forgiveness a score to keep track of. But to illustrate the core issue of what forgiveness implies, Jesus tells a wonderfully compelling story about forgiveness — and the mercy required to be behind it.

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 — Jesus Christ, Matthew 18:23-27.

- 1) The amount “ten thousand bags of gold” is thought to translate to roughly \$6 billion in today’s currency. The Greek says “ten thousand talents.” A talent was the largest unit of currency in the Greco-Roman world of which Judea was a part; a talent of gold was roughly equivalent to 20 years of a day laborer’s wages. Ten thousand talents would have represented more money than was circulating in the entirety of Israel at the time. In the Greek, 10,000 was the highest number that could even be expressed. The idea is of an impossibly astronomical amount of money that no day laborer would ever be able to pay back, leaving him both hopeless and helpless, reducing him to pleading his case on his knees before his king.
- 2) There were a number of remedies available to debt holders in the ancient world when somebody in their debt couldn’t repay. One option was to have the debtor and his family work until the debt was paid. Another option is illustrated in this story; selling all that someone had, including themselves, their wives and their children, was also a common practice, serving both as a punishment to the one in debt and as a means of receiving some level of compensation towards payment of a debt that could not possibly be paid. And while the debtor sat in prison, it was hoped that he would sell any land he maybe owned, or that relatives would come to the rescue. In this case, the astronomical debt that has been accumulated suggests that no remedy, no matter how severe, was going to be enough to even begin to address this level of obligation.
- 3) The king’s pity and compassion as a result of the servant’s plea for mercy becomes equal to the amount of debt forgiven and canceled. APHIEMI (af-ee[^]-ay-mee) — to send forth, to send away, to remit or forgive (in this case, financial debt). Forgiving such a loan would have been an astounding act of mercy and grace.

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 — Jesus Christ, Matthew 18:28-30.

- 1) The amount “a hundred silver coins” would have been roughly the equivalent of four months’ pay for a day laborer. While a significant amount of money, it in no way compares to the debt of the first servant — think of comparing \$6 billion to \$12,000.
- 2) The first servant had moved incredibly quickly from the humility of begging on his knees to a superior to demanding repayment from one of his fellow workers — an amazing display of erasing from his mind the mercy and grace that had so recently been shown him.

Obviously the forgiveness, mercy and grace shown him has had no transforming impact on his life.

- 3) An additional detail which shows the first servant's callous attitude to his fellow servant is the fact that prisoners were not allowed to earn money while captive. It would have fallen to family members to raise the money to pay off the debt to get him released from prison.

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" — Jesus Christ, Matthew 28:31-35.

- 1) It was his fellow servants who blew the whistle on him. Aware as they were of their master's incredible graciousness in forgiving the enormous debt, they could not believe their eyes when they saw how horribly he treated one of his peers. LUPEO (loo-peh[^]-o) — sorry, grieved, cause grief.
- 2) The king had already shown this servant mercy and grace; now he shows him justice — getting precisely what he deserves. The king was angered that his vivid demonstration of mercy and grace did not carry over to this servant's treatment of others.
 - a) PONEROS (pon-ay-ros[^]) — bad, evil, wicked; in this particular use, evil which causes evil to others, evil-disposed, malevolent, malignant, wicked.
 - b) PARAKALEO (par-ak-al-eh[^]-o) — to call for or upon someone as for aid, to invoke God, to beseech, entreat.
 - c) ELEEO (el-eh-eh[^]-o) — to have mercy, to show kindness, have compassion. The general meaning is to have compassion or mercy on a person in unhappy circumstances. Not merely a feeling for the misfortunes of others involving sympathy, but also an active desire to remove those miseries.
 - d) ORGIZO (or-gid[^]-zo) — angry, from a root that means to provoke or enrage, become exasperated.

APPLICATION (ROLE PLAYING THE STORY)

A couple of things to understand as we look at what this parable is trying to teach us:

- 1) This parable deals with forgiveness between believers, and specifically looks at what the Christian servant should be willing to do in response as things arise in the community; it is not about lost sinners and God.
- 2) There is a difference between receiving forgiveness and experiencing forgiveness deep in their hearts.

There are three (3) key words that we need to keep in mind as we go deeper into what Christ is trying to communicate with this parable. Those three words are justice, mercy and grace. Here are three good definitions to try and keep them straight.

- 1) Justice — getting what you deserve:
 - a) ***Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows — Paul, Galatians 6:7.***
 - b) ***Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism — Paul, Colossians 3:25.***

- 2) Mercy — not getting what you deserve: *[The Lord] does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities — David, Psalm 103:10.*
- 3) Grace — getting what you do not deserve: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast — Paul, Ephesians 2:8-9.*

Now let's look at this parable again, only with the reality of the parts being played:

- 1) The “king” in this parable is God.
- 2) The “accounts” that the king wanted to settle are our sins.
- 3) The “man who owed” the king is us — all of us.
- 4) The “debt” as a result of our sins is far beyond our ability to pay.
- 5) The king's order that the man, along with his wife, children and all his property be sold is an illustration of justice: getting what he deserved.
- 6) The king's letting the man go from what he deserved is an illustration of mercy: not getting what he deserved.
- 7) The king's cancelling the debt is an illustration of grace: getting what he didn't deserve.
- 8) The man ruthlessly going after his fellow-servant and his debt showed the fundamental lessons of this parable:
 - a) Someone who does not grant forgiveness to others shows that his own heart has not experienced God's forgiveness.
 - b) When we don't forgive others, we are setting ourselves outside and above Christ's law of love.
- 9) The man's being brought back to face the king is us again, having to face the righteous anger of a righteous God who will take note of the mercy we have, or haven't, shown to our brothers and sisters.
 - a) As James wrote in his letter: *[J]udgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment — James 2:13.*
 - b) That's why Jesus told the crowds in the Sermon on the Mount: *“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:7.*
 - c) The Lord's words would have found their echo in the Old Testament words of the prophet Micah (which that audience would have known): Question: *With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? Answer: [The Lord] has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God — Micah 6:6-8.*

This brings us to the sub-question this week: Why is mercy so easy to want but so difficult to give? The first part is relatively easy: We think we deserve it. That's one reason we are so quick to offer up excuses as to why something maybe went wrong but it certainly wasn't our fault and, if you were facing all of this, you would have done the same thing I did and I was really trying my best so I think I deserve credit for everything I did and just overlook and forget about the stuff that didn't go so well because I am basically a good person so I don't deserve anything but mercy in this case — and the next time this happens, and the next and the next and probably the time after that, too. Basically, we like ourselves and we think we're pretty good — at least most of the

time. Why shouldn't we receive mercy? And why shouldn't anybody be virtually honored to bestow that mercy upon us?

However, when we look at the second part of that — why is mercy so difficult to give? In simple terms, we forget about the mercy God has shown us, in that, in the language of this story:

- 1) He forgave a debt we could never repay.
- 2) He released us from that debt forever.

But that's not all we forget:

- 1) We forget whose church this is, and
- 2) We forget what we were (and would still be) without God's mercy and grace through Jesus Christ.

Paul confirmed to the Colossians just whose church the body of believers is: *[The Son (Jesus Christ)] is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy — Paul, Colossians 1:17-18.*

The other part of that — remembering what we were and what has been done for us through the mercy and grace of God through Jesus Christ — was something that Paul was continually emphasizing to the churches in which he ministered and wrote his letters:

- 1) To the church at Rome: *God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners (while we were God's enemies — Romans 5:10a), Christ died for us — Paul, Romans 5:8.*
- 2) To the church at Corinth: *[D]o you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral or idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with me nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God — Paul, I Corinthians 6:9-11.*
- 3) To the church at Ephesus: *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit that is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — Paul, Ephesians 2:1-5a.*

Even before that, Jesus as he used the elements of the Passover feast to repurpose them to tell his story, he included this critical instruction as he broke the bread and as he drank the wine, elements that would now represent his body which would be broken apart for us, and his blood that would be freely poured out for us: *“[D]o this in remembrance of me — Jesus Christ, Luke 22:19b.*

Maybe one way to approach this is to just stop the world for a second and think: What was my debt? How much had I sinned? How much had I fallen short of God's glory (Romans 3:23)? How did God once upon a time see me? Just focus on that for a bit. And then consider: Did I ever give God a reason to offer me his mercy and grace? Did I deserve anything other than his holy and perfect justice?

So what happened? Jesus happened. So what did Jesus do that I couldn't?

And now think: How do I live my life in light of what Jesus did? Do I carry him with me — not just his salvation, but a continuing awe of what he did for me?

When I was in the Marines, I heard stories all the time about Marines who had made the ultimate sacrifice — oftentimes the stories about a Marine diving on a hand grenade to save the other Marines who were right there. And part of the wonder of the story, as told by the Marines who told them to me, was that these guys made that sacrifice without even being sure they knew everybody they were saving. They just did it.

But when Jesus took the punishment, when Jesus took the cross, when Jesus was slaughtered for us that terrible day 2,000 years ago, he knew — he knew who he was dying for. He knew it was me that put him on that horrible cross. He knew what I had done. He knew my name.

That's why an ongoing prayer of the apostle Paul was these words that he shared with the Christians at Ephesus: *I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge — that you may be filled to the measure with all the fullness of God — Paul, Ephesians 3:16-19.* Translation? Do we really understand what Jesus did for us? Try. Never quit trying to grasp what Jesus did, or how he did it — or why. If ever there was something not about us, the love, mercy and grace that God presented in his Son through his life on earth and his death on the cross would be that. It was, and is, all about God.

CONCLUSION

Everything we have, everything we are, everything we hope for in eternity, is because of Jesus Christ — his love, his mercy and his grace. If we don't carry his sacrifice with us, if we don't carry his mercy with us, we will never be able to be the servants, and the church, he intends us to be. To give mercy to others, we simply have to remember the mercy he gave to us. Let's pray!