

Matthew 18:21-35

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” ²² Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven^[a] times.

²³ “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him, ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, the lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him by the throat he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Sermon: What's Ten Thousand Talents Between Two Friends?

Jesus tells a story: two debts, two debtors, two outcomes. But to feel the full thrust of this parable, we need context.

A denarius was a day's wage. A talent was the largest unit of currency, roughly 6,000 days of wages, or twenty years of labor.

When Jesus says the first servant owes ten thousand talents, he's describing an impossible sum, roughly sixty million days of wages. As a good storyteller, we might say a gazillion dollars! As a forensic accountant, we could think about today's wages. The sum is probably closer to \$7.2 billion. The point is, this is an unimaginable sum, and it immediately alerts the listener to be ready for a parable.

The second servant owes 100 denarii, roughly four months of wages, or about \$12,000. Significant, but not impossible. A debt that requires patience over panic. Unsettling, yes. But it can certainly be settled.

This parable makes me think of another moment. In 2008–2009, major financial institutions in our country accumulated massive, unsustainable debts. When the reckoning came, they pleaded for mercy, and they received it. "Too big to fail," they said. Grace in the form of massive bailouts and restructurings followed their plea.

Many of these same institutions held the notes for ordinary people's homes and cars. Not extravagant debts. Just human debts. And when the reckoning came for them, there was no mercy. For millions of Americans, 100 denarii might as well have been 10,000 talents. Homes and cars were repossessed in record numbers. And two decades later, the ground is still shaky.

There's a simple way to read this parable, "Good king forgives big debt; bad servant refuses small one."

Indulge me by avoiding this temptation. Because Jesus is doing much more than sorting good guys from bad guys, or even sheep from goats. This morning, Jesus laments a world, both ancient and modern, where systems prioritize commodities over people.

The first servant could live in any age. In fact, they do. Maybe this person was a tax collector responsible for gathering revenue for an entire region. Ten thousand talents, tens of billions of dollars, wouldn't be an unimaginable sum for a government budget. Not in Wake County, not in North Carolina, not in Washington. And when deficits come, leaders rarely face punishment. The system simply extracts more from the masses. Across eras and administrations, the burden most often falls on society's most vulnerable citizens, those with the least margin.

Here's an example. I've been alive nearly a half-century. I've lived here my whole life. I don't remember a time when our state's public education budget had a bountiful surplus. There's always a deficit. In response, we've cut lunches for children, we've cut teacher and support staff positions, even entire curricula. We've shuttered buildings, delayed raises, and on and on it goes. And yet, have our legislators, on both sides of the aisle, ever been furloughed, docked pay, or invoiced for the accounts they promised their constituents to fulfill?

Jesus is naming a world where the powerful discard the weak, where leaders make choices that betray their own humanity, where the vulnerable absorb the full brunt of economic callousness. "It's just business," they say. "Nothing personal." To whom?

But Jesus sets expectations for a different world, a realm rooted in a new currency. Or perhaps reoriented to the original currency. A kingdom, or kinship, or expanded village where love is the medium of exchange. Where a benevolent Creator forgives ten thousand talents without needing to recover them from the poor. Where enough-ness isn't measured by balance sheets.

It's a world where love transcends and transforms our needs. If we are fed. If we are clothed. If we are loved. If we have value. If we are God's children...then what need do we have for denarii and talents?

Jesus doesn't claim this world exists fully right now. But Jesus insists this world is both possible, and something we should expect. Every act of forgiveness pulls us a little further into God's economy, away from scarcity, toward compassion. As Walter Rauschenbusch reminds us, "The Kingdom of God is always but coming."

Then there's that tricky ending to this morning's pericope. The unforgiving servant handed over to be tortured until they repay their debt. And the warning that the same will happen to us if we don't forgive.

I'll be honest, I don't like it. I don't believe in a punitive God. I believe in a loving God.

I want to implore you to remember the context. **THIS IS HYPERBOLE!!!** This is the same rhetorical exaggeration that gives us 10,000 talents, a gazillion dollars. The author of Matthew uses dramatic language to stress urgency. Forgiveness isn't something to practice sparingly, nor something to postpone. Forgiveness is essential to our very being.

Without forgiveness, both for ourselves and for others, we trap ourselves in cycles of resentment and scarcity.

The torture described in this passage is a brutal image. But remember, please remember, it's a metaphor, and a clumsy one at that. Don't mistake it for God's unbending punishment. The metaphor or torture is trying, awkwardly, to describe the spiritual reality of life without lived grace.

Can you imagine the ache in your spirit, the constant twisting of your soul, if you believed grace was always too much to give or receive? Can you imagine the prolonged pain of contorting ourselves into some grotesque version of our createdness, creatures who withhold, alienate, wound, and hoard?

Now juxtapose the image of the purposeless life with one rooted in true purpose, steeped in the principle of loving God and neighbor, grounded in empathy, forgiveness, and collaboration. What rest, what provisions, what comfort might we find in simply giving ourselves permission to be whom God has created us to be, and to forge communities founded in that collective goodness and sacredness?

Good friends, God's economy is vast. There is no sum too large to forgive, no person beyond grace. Grace for the tenant. Grace for the debtor. Grace for the defaulter. And yes, yes, yes, grace for the landlord, the creditor, and the collector.

There is a better deal to be had, one that isn't built on maximizing profit at the expense of the vulnerable. In God's economy, the first of the month is just another day. And our true purpose, our lived purpose, needn't be financed or leveraged to become reality.

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Bob Stillerman
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And maybe, if we take Jesus' advice to Peter, seventy-seven acts of forgiveness, we might begin to understand God's economy a little better. Because in the end, what's 10,000 talents between friends who live, and love, in God's kingdom?

Amen.