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The Unforgiving Servant

Matthew 18:21-35

Personal forgiveness cannot be given to a totally innocent person. Nor will it be received by one who insists on his innocence. That made it hard for Jesus to give the gospel of God's grace to the religious leaders of His nation. They could not or would not see that they were guilty of any sin. Tax collectors and harlots, on the other hand, readily acknowledged their guilt and need of forgiveness. God is ready, willing, and able, Jesus said, to forgive all sins. Forgiveness becomes impossible, however, to the one who cannot see that he has sinned.

It is not possible, either, for anyone to grant forgiveness until he is offended. To say, "There's no harm done; it's not worth a second thought," is not forgiving; it is denying that there is anything to forgive. Very often there isn't. No virtue attaches to the generosity that costs nothing to him who bestows it. Real forgiveness is woven of much tougher fiber. Luke 17:3-4 says, "*Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him.*" Since true forgiveness implies that there has been a loss by the one called on to forgive, perhaps we can see the difficulty of forgiving multiple times. How could God expect such a sacrifice? This parable answers that question along with some others.

1. In your opinion, which does the world need more: justice or mercy? Why? Which does the *church* need more?

2. The context of this parable begins in verse 1 of the chapter. What major issues had Jesus already addressed when Peter asked his question in verse 21? How does Peter's question relate to these issues?

3. Some rabbis of Peter's time said that a person should forgive three times. The fourth transgression was the unforgivable one. If this was in Peter's mind, how generous was his "up to seven times" evaluation? How did it compare with Jesus' answer? What do you suppose went through Peter's mind when Jesus spoke what is in verse 22? (Consider Luke 17:3-4)

4. Was Jesus seeking to limit the number of times one might forgive in verse 22? If not, what was His meaning? (Consider 1 Corinthians 13:5d)

5. Is there any significance to the fact that the servant mentioned in verse 24 was *brought* to the King?

6. How would you describe the debt the servant owed the King? (One student of the Scriptures has reckoned that, at the Roman wage of a denarius per day, ten thousand talents of *silver* would hire a thousand men for more than a hundred years!) Why, when the servant couldn't pay his debt, did the King command him and his relatives to be sold? Would this act retire such a debt?

7. How did the servant react to the King's command to sell him? What is *wrong* with his response? (See v. 26) How does this correspond to the responses of some people in the presence of God today?

8. What motivated the King to forgive the man of his debt? (See v. 27) How much did His generosity cost Him? What did the servant have to pay in order to receive this forgiveness? What is the cost of forgiveness when *we* forgive a debt? What should we expect to receive in return?

9. Examine carefully the first slave's response to his fellow slave's debt to him (v. 28). The amount of the first servant's forgiven debt has been computed at 1,250,000 times as much as debt his fellow servant owed him. Why did Jesus set up such a contrast?

10. Compare the fellow servant's words in verse 29 with the first servant's words in verse 26. You would think that this near *echo* would have caught the first servant's attention, but apparently it did not. Do unforgiving followers of Christ today hear the echo of the words they spoke when becoming Christians in the words of those who wrong them?

11. The unforgiving servant's actions quickly reached the ears of the King. What does this suggest?

12. Consider the emotions of the unforgiving servant's fellow slaves (v. 31). Is there a parallel to this in our experience?

13. In the King's rebuke (v. 32) what was the unforgiving slave called? What does this say about those who take pride in the fact that they hold others accountable for their wrongs so that they don't "get away with anything."

14. Find as many adjectives *in the text* of this passage as you can that describe the character of the King. What is the significance of these words?

15. Read Jesus' words in verse 35 again. What did He mean by His words, "*from your heart.*" How is it possible to do this in cases where extreme wrong has been done?