

1-1-2011

Potent Mercy: Reflections on the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18.23-35)

Heather Gorman
heather.gorman2@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gorman, Heather (2011) "Potent Mercy: Reflections on the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18.23-35)," *Leaven*: Vol. 19: Iss. 2, Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol19/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

Potent Mercy: Reflections on the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18.23–35)

HEATHER GORMAN

Matthew is unique among the four Gospels in his presentation of Jesus' teaching in that he organizes much of Jesus' teachings into five large discourses—the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5–7), instructions about the disciples' mission in the world (chapter 10), parables about the kingdom of heaven (chapter 13), teaching on life within the Christian community (chapter 18) and an indictment of the religious leaders accompanied by teachings on the end of the age (chapters 23–25). Within the fourth discourse (chapter 18), two units emerge: (1) care for the “little ones” (18.1–14), and (2) correction and forgiveness of fellow community members (18.15–35). In this second unit, Jesus instructs believers on how to handle a fellow believer who has sinned—the goal is to bring the person back into good standing, rather than to cast her or him out of fellowship.

However, as many of us know, Christians do, at times, continue sinning against one another. Peter seems to have had just that thought in mind when he asked Jesus a natural follow-up question: “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”¹ (18.21). At first, Peter's question sounds somewhat like that of the lawyer's in Luke 10, who, when told that in order to inherit eternal life he must love his God and his neighbor, attempted to justify himself with the question, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10.29). Yet, when we look at precedents on limits to forgiveness in Judaism, which may have specified a limit of up to three times,² we see that Peter is not trying to scrape by with the bare minimum. He is actually being generous!

Jesus responds to Peter's suggestion by saying that he should forgive “not seven times, but . . . seventy-seven times” (18.22). Although Jesus' answer here could be interpreted as “seventy-seven” times or “seventy times seven” times, the former is probably preferable.³ If we follow the former, more preferable reading, Jesus could be alluding to the story of Lamech in Genesis 4.24, where Lamech boasts to his wives that he will avenge those who wrong him seventy-sevenfold (in contrast to Cain who only avenged them sevenfold). When we read Jesus' words with this in mind, forgiveness becomes the antithesis of revenge.⁴

Jesus' response to Peter shows continuity with a concept he introduced in the Sermon on the Mount: the disciples' righteousness ought to exceed that of the Pharisees (Matt 5.20). That is, in the kingdom of heaven, disciples avoid not only adultery, but also lust. They avoid not only murder, but also anger. They love not only their friends, but also their enemies. They forgive not only three times—or even seven—but rather

1. All scripture is quoted from the NRSV.

2. Darrell Bock cites two rabbinic teachings that suggest such a limit (*Abot de Rabbi Nathan* 40a; *b. Yoma* 86^b, 87^a). See his *Jesus According to Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 245. The literary device in Amos, “For three transgressions . . . and for four” may indicate a similar standard (cf. Amos 1.3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2.1, 4, 6).

3. W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, “ἑβδομηκοντάκις (*hebdomekontakis*),” *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (3^d ed.; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 269.

4. Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Westminster, 1993), 216.

seventy-seven! Essentially, if disciples are counting how many times they have forgiven a fellow believer, they may not be forgiving them at all!⁵ The exact number—whether seventy-seven or seventy times seven—is irrelevant.

As he does elsewhere in Matthew, Jesus provides not only a specific answer or instruction, but also a parable to exemplify his answer. This parable is meant to tell about the nature of forgiveness in the kingdom of heaven. Before we can talk about forgiveness in the kingdom of heaven, however, we must talk about the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven, which Mark and Luke refer to as the kingdom of God, refers to the reign of God. In this kingdom, God's rule and God's righteousness prevail. The kingdom of heaven—both at the time of Jesus and now—is present, but not yet completely realized. That is, as Jesus points out in his third discourse, the kingdom of heaven does not come all at once, but rather, like a mustard seed, it begins small but grows into something great (13.31–32). Its full realization will not come until Jesus' second coming, but until that time, Jesus' followers are to live with kingdom values, one of which is forgiveness.

In this parable, often referred to as the parable of the unmerciful servant, Jesus demonstrates what forgiveness is like in the kingdom of God. The parable has three distinct scenes—verses 23–27, verses 28–30 and verses 31–35. In the first scene, a king decides to settle accounts with his slaves. The verb to “settle accounts” is used only twice in the New Testament, both times in Matthew. Outside of this parable, Matthew uses it in the parable of the talents: after being away for a long time, the master returns to “settle accounts” with his slaves (Matt 25.19). Although two of the servants in Matthew 25 are able to settle accounts with the master, the slave in Matthew 18 is not so fortunate. Whereas the slaves in Matthew 25 were in charge of, at most, five talents, the slave in Matthew 18 owes the king 10,000 talents (v. 24).

Just how much was 10,000 talents? In terms of weight, 10,000 talents would be the equivalent of at least 204 metric tons of silver. In terms of value, it would be 60 million denarii. One denarius was the salary for a day's work among common laborers.⁶ One need not attempt to render a similar value in dollars to express the huge amount that this slave owed the king. Scholars point out that in the first century, 10,000 was the highest arithmetic figure and a talent was the highest currency.⁷ Needless to say, it would be impossible for this slave to repay what he owed the king. In response, the king orders the slave, his wife, his children and all of his possessions to be sold (v. 25). Such a sale would hardly put a dent in the amount owed to the king and thus should be viewed as punishment.

Left with no other option, the slave falls on his knees and begs the king to be patient with him. He wants more time to repay this enormous debt (v. 26). In response to such pleading, the king has pity on the slave (v. 27). The verb translated “to have pity” is the same verb that Matthew uses in 9.36 when he tells of Jesus having compassion on the helpless crowds (9.36; 14.14; 15.32). In his pity, the king grants even more than the slave asks: he does not just give the slave more time to repay this enormous debt; he actually forgives the debt entirely (v. 27). Jesus has thus painted the picture of mercy in the kingdom of heaven.

In the second scene, verses 28–30, Jesus tells of the slave's response to the king's mercy. As he goes on his way, just recently the recipient of unfathomable mercy, the slave happens upon a fellow slave who owes him money. The sum owed here, however, is 100 denarii—a miniscule amount compared to what the slave owed the king. The slave grabs his fellow slave by the throat and demands that he repay him (v. 28). Scene two repeats what just happened in scene one—nearly verbatim in the Greek—only with different characters. The fellow slave falls before the slave and begs him with the same words that the slave had used to beg the king: “Be patient with me and I will pay you” (v. 29).

Just what does the slave do? Surely he will see that what is owed to him is a fraction of what he had

5. Tom right, *Matthew for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2002), 2:40.

6. John W. Betlyon, “Coinage,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:1086; Marvin A. Powell, “Weights and Measures,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6:907.

7. David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 197; Simon J. Kistemaker, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 65.

owed the king! Surely he will give his fellow slave more time to pay! Surely he will have mercy on his fellow slave!

The hearer of this parable is shocked at what happens next. The slave refuses his fellow-slave's request and throws him in prison until he can repay him! Such an action spits in the face of the king who just forgave him of more than he could repay in a lifetime. The hearer of the parable is sorely disappointed in the slave's action. In light of the mercy the slave recently received, hearers of this parable expect the slave to reciprocate the mercy that was bestowed upon him, especially since the fellow slave's promise to repay him is actually credible! "Who could respond to mercy so mercilessly?" the hearers ask themselves.

The king asks himself the same question when he hears about the slave's actions. He summons the slave and confronts him about his response to the mercy bestowed upon him: "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" (vv. 32–33). In his anger, the king hands over the slave to be tortured until he can pay his entire debt (v. 34). In light of the enormity of his debt, the hearers would rightfully assume that he would be tortured eternally.

Jesus ends the parable on an ominous note, warning his readers that his Father will treat them in the same way if they refuse forgiveness to their brother or sister (v. 35). This closing line hearkens back to two portions of the Sermon on the Mount. First, we hear echoes of The Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt 5.12). God's forgiveness is connected with the forgiveness we give to others. Second, we are reminded of Jesus' teaching on judgment: "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get" (Matt 7.1–2). The slave in this parable is judged with the same judgment that he used against his fellow slave.

As the parable shifts from lavish grace to harsh judgment, mercy's potency emerges. On the one hand, the king pours out undeserved mercy on his servant when he does nothing more than ask for it. On the other hand, the king pours out unrelenting judgment on his servant when this mercy goes unreciprocated. A transformation is required. Since Christians have received mercy from God, they cannot go on with their lives unchanged. In the kingdom of heaven, mercy from God results in mercy toward others. Such is the only response to the benevolence of the king. Jesus' parable here provides the needed balance with the instruction that precedes it. It must be read in its larger context in order to be appropriated properly. If a person reads 18.21–35 without reading Jesus' instructions in 18.15–20, that person does not have a complete picture of what relationships look like within the Christian community. An outpouring of mercy on others as a response to God's graciousness toward us does not promote the overlooking of sinful behavior. Just prior to our parable, Jesus instructs church members to speak to fellow believers about wrongdoings they have committed against one another. They are to pursue the wrongdoers like a shepherd pursues a lost sheep in order to bring them back into proper fellowship. Such action refuses to overlook wrongdoing. At the same time, this action, this confrontation, happens with reconciliation as the goal, and with forgiveness in the forefront of the mind. In the kingdom of heaven, disciples seek reconciliation among one another and show mercy toward one another because it is the only proper response to the gracious acts of our king.

In what ways, then, are we failing to forgive one another and thus failing to respond appropriately to the mercy we have received? Have we refused to reconcile with the church from which we split or with the church that split from us? Are we bitter and resentful toward the person who received the promotion that we thought we deserved? Are we unable to let go of the pain caused long ago by our sister or brother, mother or father, daughter or son? Should not God's mercy toward us spur us on toward reconciliation with our fellow believers?

As Christians we joyously welcome the king's lavish mercy when it is bestowed upon us. We are not so joyous about the idea of being judged for our failure to give out undeserved mercy to those who owe us, or

who have wronged us, or who have judged us, and so on. But in the end, this parable teaches us that we may not have one without the other. Such is the paradox of potent mercy in the kingdom of heaven.

HEATHER GORMAN IS A DOCTORAL STUDENT OF NEW TESTAMENT AT BAYLOR UNIVERSITY AND A MEMBER OF THE ROBINSON CHURCH OF CHRIST IN WACO, TEXAS.

