

(T) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this teaching series, you will have the opportunity to learn how to understand and teach the parables of Jesus Christ. By using *the guidelines for interpreting parables*, two teachers will study **the parable of the unmerciful servant** in Matthew 18:15-35. Remember that this parable was told in the context of parables about God's kingdom. This is a parable concerning FORGIVENESS IN GOD'S KINGDOM. As you listen to this programme, make notes in a notebook or record the programme. Please read Matthew 18:15-35.

(S) Matthew 18:23-34 says, "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 talents 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. 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, cancelled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. 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 you back.' But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I cancelled 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 turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.'"

(T) **POINT 1. UNDERSTAND THE NATURAL STORY OF THE PARABLE.**

Let us take turns to explain the true-to-life elements of the story of this parable. The story of this parable has three parts:

The first part of the story: A king shows mercy to his servant by cancelling his huge debt. A king wanted to settle accounts with his servants. These *servants* were not ordinary slaves, but high officials, probably provincial governors (satraps). Their duty was to collect the royal taxes in their provinces and to deliver these large sums of money to the king at the proper time. One by one, these servants were summoned to appear before the king. One servant was not able to pay. He owed the king *ten thousand talents!* *One talent* equalled six thousand denarii. *One denarius* was the wages earned by a labourer in one day. A labourer would have to work for about twenty years *to earn* just one talent! He would have to work for many more years *to save* just one talent. Thus, this servant owed the king such a great amount of money that he would never ever have been able to pay it to the king! Why he owed this amount, we are not told. He could have failed to collect the taxes, or failed to keep it save, or simply squandered it for his own purposes. The important thing is that *his debt was absolutely impossible to pay off!*

The king ordered that he and his whole family be sold into slavery in order to repay a small part of the debt. This practice of selling those who were unable to pay their debts was not a practice approved in Israel, but it was common to the neighbouring countries of Israel and a well-known practice. The servant fell prostrate at the king's feet and begged for mercy. He did not deny that he owed this huge amount of money. He also did not try to explain how he got into this difficult situation. He must have realised that it was absolutely impossible to repay this huge debt, and yet he pleaded for patience and promised to pay back the whole amount! He said this in the hope to escape the terrible punishment. The king took pity on him. Out of sheer compassion he cancelled his whole debt and let him go! He did to him very much more than he asked or expected! The first part of the parable shows *the almost unthinkable and certainly undeserved compassion and mercy of the king.*

(S) The second part of the story: That servant refuses to cancel his fellow servant's petty debt. Outside, that servant met one of his fellow servants, who owed him only *one hundred denarii*. Compared to his own huge debt, this amount was a mere trifle. One hundred denarii is an amount six hundred thousand times smaller than what he had owed to the king! Before his fellow servant could even utter a word, the unmerciful servant grabbed him by the throat and began to choke him. He demanded immediate payment. The story does not tell us why he behaved so heartless. May be his hurt pride and deep humiliation for his failure of being a good steward in the eyes of others gave him a desire to revenge his humiliation on the first person he met.

His fellow servant also fell prostrate at his feet and begged for mercy. This servant was realistic about his debt. Unlike the unmerciful servant, he did not promise to pay back everything, but simply promised to pay back money. But the unmerciful servant remained unwilling and had him thrown in jail. Because his fellow servant's debt was so small, it was not legally permitted to sell him into slavery, but it was legally permitted to have him sentenced to prison and forced labour until he had worked off his debt. It was common practice to imprison and even torture such people in

order to reveal where they might have stashed away their treasure or to induce their relatives and friends to pay the debt. The second part of the parable shows *the cruelty of the forgiven-yet-unmerciful servant*.

(T) The third part of the story: The king re-imposed the cruel servant's former sentence and even made it worse. When the other servants witnessed the cruelty of the unmerciful servant, they reported everything to the king. The king summoned the servant he had forgiven and accused him of being a wicked servant, a villain. The cruel and unmerciful servant should have shown mercy to his fellow servant, *just as the king had done*. It was his duty not only to be grateful for the king's mercy, but to actually follow the king's example in his conduct to his fellow men. It was his lasting obligation to forgive all those who had wronged him. With settled indignation, the king handed this cruel servant to the jailers to be tortured until he had paid back everything he owed.

(S) **POINT 2. EXAMINE THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT AND DETERMINE THE ELEMENTS OF THE PARABLE.**

Let us take turns to describe the context of the parable.

The setting of the parable is contained in Matthew 18:15-22.

One. The rule of discipline. In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus taught his disciples that they should take the initiative to get reconciled with a brother, who sins against them. Although the words "against you" in verse 15 lacks in the best ancient manuscripts, they are implied as Luke 17:3-4 teaches, because the meeting with the erring brother was of a private character and also Peter's question in verse 21 implies a sin of a more private nature. Nevertheless, whenever the interests of the Church demand or allow it, the rule of Matthew 18:15 should be applied, not only to private sins, but also to public sins.

(T) Two. The question of forgiveness. In Matthew 18:21-22, although Peter realised that a Christian must take the initiative to bring about a complete reconciliation, he wanted to know *how often* must a Christian show mercy to his erring brother. This way of looking at spiritual matters and this manner of arguing looked like that of the Jewish teachers of the law. They taught that one must forgive the first, second and even third insult, but punish the fourth insult! It sounded as if "forgiveness" was a commodity that could be measured and manipulated, as if it could be parcelled out little by little up to a certain definite limit, beyond which a person should no more forgive! Peter's question was about the extent of forgiveness, and he himself thought that seven times was very reasonable.

However, Jesus answered that forgiveness cannot be expressed in measurable size. It consists of a basic attitude to forgive those who do wrong to you. He said that a person must forgive his erring brother seventy times seven times! He does not mean literally 490 times. He is using the Jewish numerology to indicate something beyond the perfect number of times. By multiplying two 'perfect numbers', seven and ten, with the 'perfect number' seven, Jesus intended to show that *genuine forgiveness does not recognise boundaries or a certain definite limit. Forgiveness is a state of the heart and not a matter of calculation.*

At this point, Jesus told the parable of the unmerciful servant.

(S) The story of the parable is contained in Matthew 18:23-34.

The explanation or application of the parable is contained in Matthew 18:35, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

(T) **POINT 3. IDENTIFY THE RELEVANT AND IRRELEVANT DETAILS OF THE PARABLE.**

Jesus does not give any of the details in this parable any particular meaning. However, the following are relevant details:

First. The king and his two servants. In his application in Matthew 18:35, he applies the central point of the story to God, the Christian and the erring brother. Only these aspects have relevance. He says, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." The king's mercy represents God's mercy. The servant's mercy, which he should have shown to his fellow servant, represents the forgiveness, which a Christian should give to his erring brother.

Second. The ten thousand talents and one hundred denarii. The huge amount of money, ten thousand talents, represents your and my sin in our relationship towards God. This huge amount shows that you or I *can never* pay our debt towards God! It is *humanly impossible*! The petty amount of money, one hundred denarii, represents another person's sin against you or me. Although it is a substantial amount, equal to three months of wages, it still is *humanly possible* to pay it! This small amount shows that by God's grace, you and I *can* forgive another person's wrongdoing against us. These two amounts do not represent any specific kind of sin or any measurable amount of sin.

Three. The jailers who torture. These details are not given any specific meaning, but represent the Final Judgement, when each person will receive what is due to him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. All the other details of this parable should not be given any particular significance. They only enhance the story.

(S) POINT 4. IDENTIFY THE MAIN MESSAGE OF THE PARABLE.

The parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18:15-35 teaches about *forgiveness in God's kingdom*.

The main message of the parable is the following. "There is a direct link between divine forgiveness, that is, the forgiveness one receives, and human forgiveness, that is, the forgiveness one gives to someone who sins against one. A Christian, whose sins have been forgiven, must always be willing to forgive whoever sinned against him." He must not only do this out of gratitude that God has forgiven him his sins, but also because God demands that he follows God's example in his conduct towards other people. Because God has forgiven the Christian, the Christian must forgive others! The Christian must let go of his claim to his rights and let grace triumph over his rights! Love demands the exclusion of natural self-love!

Forgiveness is a fundamental characteristic of God's kingdom. The people of God's kingdom must not be unmerciful or cruel towards their erring brothers, but must forgive them their trespasses again and again (Matthew 6:12,14-15).

(T) POINT 5. COMPARE THE PARABLE WITH PARALLEL AND CONTRASTING PASSAGES.

The truth in all the parables also has parallel or contrasting truth taught in other passages of the Bible. Try to find the most important cross-references that help us to interpret the parable. Always check the interpretation of a parable with the direct and clear teaching of the Bible. Let us take turns to share how what other Bible passages teach compare to what this parable teaches?

(S) Romans 3:23 says "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God". It teaches that all people on earth are God's debtors and need God's forgiveness.

(T) Psalm 49:7 says, "No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him." It teaches that nobody is able to pay either his own or his brother's debt against God.

(S) Romans 3:19 says that every mouth is silenced, and the whole world is held accountable to God. It teaches that this debt against God must be paid!

(T) Romans 3:22-25 says that all who believe are justified freely by God's grace through the redemption of Christ, who is a sacrifice of atonement for sins. It teaches that a person's debts will only be cancelled when he believes in Christ's sacrifice of atonement for his sins.

(S) Matthew 6:14-15 says, "If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." It teaches that a person can only be certain that his own debts or sins are cancelled if he himself cancels the debts of those who transgressed against him. Assurance of forgiveness is only possible when a person has also forgiven those who sinned against him.

(T) POINT 6. SUMMARISE THE MAIN TEACHINGS OF THE PARABLE.

Let us take turns to summarise the main teachings or messages of the parable.

(S) First. The main message of the parable is that there is a direct link between divine forgiveness, that is, the forgiveness one receives, and human forgiveness, that is, the forgiveness one gives to someone who sins against one.

(T) Second. All people must know what the God of the Bible is like. One great lesson of this parable is that it shows the unimaginable merciful and forgiving spirit of the God of the Bible. Our sins in God's eyes may be compared to the debt of ten thousand talents, an amount that no one can ever pay back to God! While the debt we owe God, due to our sins, can never be paid by anyone of us, Jesus Christ paid the debt for everyone who believes in him! He died on the cross to make atonement for our sins! And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, will be saved (Rom 10:13).

(S) Third. Christians must know what God wants them to be and to do. Another great lesson of this parable is that it teaches us what God wants us to be and to do. It teaches that we must go and get reconciled to every person against whom we harbour a grievance or who may have some grievance against us! It teaches that we must not put forgiveness and reconciliation off, but do it now, because tomorrow it may be too late! Forgiveness is one of the basic characteristics of God's kingdom! The people of God's kingdom do not harbour grudges, nor keep accounts of other

people's sins against them, but immediately take the initiative to forgive and to get reconciled (1 Cor 13:5). The people of God's kingdom must not be unmerciful or cruel towards their erring brothers, but must forgive them their trespasses again and again and again (Mt 6:12,14-15).

(T) ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK

First. Preach, teach or study this parable together with another person or group of people. Next week we will study the parable of the wise and foolish builders. As preparation, please read Matthew 7:24-27 and Luke 6:47-49.

Second. See the workbooks "Go and preach God's Kingdom and www.dota.net

Third. Listen every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY on the radio to "Discipleship training on the air".