

# PARABLE: THE UNMERCIFUL DEBTOR

Matthew 18:23-35

## STRUCTURE

**Key-persons:** Jesus; in the parable: the king and the unmerciful debtor

**Key-location:** On the road toward Jerusalem

### Key-repetitions:

- Forgive/cancel debt: (Mat 18:21, 22, 27, 30, 32).
- Confront wrongdoer: alone (Mat 18:15); with two or more (Mat 18:16); with church (Mat 18:17).
- Listen/won't listen: (Mat 18:15, 16, 17, 17).
- Two: witnesses (Mat 18:16); praying together (Mat 18:19).
- Debt/debtor: servant owed the king (Mat 18:24); servant couldn't pay the king (Mat 18:25); king canceled debt (Mat 18:27); servant owed fellow servant (Mat 18:28); servant couldn't pay fellow servant (Mat 18:29); servant threw fellow servant into debtor's prison (Mat 18:30); king punished unmerciful debtor (Mat 18:34).

### Key-attitudes:

- Debtor's hopelessness.
- King's mercy.
- Unmerciful debtor's greed.
- Fellow servants' anger at unmerciful debtor.
- King's anger at unmerciful debtor.

### Initial-situation:

Jesus was in the second half of his third year of public ministry. Religious leaders' antagonism toward Jesus increased. The people flip-flopped between excitement for Jesus when he performed a miracle, and anger toward Jesus when they didn't like his teaching. Jesus warned his disciples twice, that in Jerusalem he would die and come back to life. Jesus was traveling toward Jerusalem for the Passover Feast. Jesus interacted with the crowd that followed him. He constantly found teaching moments for his disciples. Jesus finished telling the parable of the Shepherd Seeking the Lost Sheep. Then Jesus made the application showing how his followers demonstrate the Great Shepherd's concern for stray "sheep."

### Initial-problem:

Jesus told his disciples, "If a believer sins against you, go to him. When the two of you are alone, show him his fault."

**Final-situation:**

Jesus concluded his parable, "The king was angry and turned the unmerciful servant over to the jailers to be tortured until he could pay back his entire debt. That is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you, unless you forgive other believers from the heart."

**BIBLE STORY****Treatment of a Brother Who Sins Against You**

Jesus told his disciples, "If a believer sins against you, go to him. When the two of you are alone, show him his fault. If he listens to you, you've won your brother over. However, if he won't listen, take one or two others along, in order that every accusation may be verified by the testimony of two or more witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church. If he refuses to listen to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

"I tell you the truth, a 'yes' on earth is a 'yes' in heaven. A 'no' on earth is a 'no' in heaven. Again I tell you, if two of you on earth agree about anything you pray for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, I am among them" (Mat 18:15-20).

**Parable: The Unmerciful Servant**

Peter spoke up, "Lord, if a believer keeps sinning against me, how often do I forgive a believer who wrongs me? Up to seven times?"

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven.

"The Kingdom of Heaven is like a king who decided to settle his accounts with his servants. A servant who owed him billions of dollars was brought to him. The servant couldn't pay his debt. The king ordered the servant, the servant's wife, and his children to be auctioned off at the slave market to repay the debt.

"The servant fell on his knees before the king begging, 'Be patient with me, and I'll pay back everything.' The king took pity on the servant, canceled the debt, and let him go.

"However, when that servant went away, he found a fellow servant who owed him thousands of dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded, 'Pay back what you owe me!'

"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged, 'Be patient with me, and I'll repay you.'

"But the lender refused. Instead, he threw the debtor into prison until the debt was paid. The other servants saw what happened. They were outraged! They reported to the king everything that happened.

"Then the king summoned the unmerciful servant in and told him, 'You wicked servant. I canceled all your debt because you begged me to do so. Shouldn't you have shown mercy to your fellow servant just as I did to you?' The king was angry and turned the servant over to the jailers to be tortured until he could pay back his entire debt. That is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive other believers from your heart" (Mat 18:21-35).

## GENERIC DIALOGUE QUESTIONS

1. What catches your attention in the story?
2. Is there anything in the story that is hard to understand?
3. Who are the main characters in the story?
4. What problems did the characters face?
5. How did the characters face their problems?
6. How have you faced similar problems?
7. Is there someone in the story who is similar to you or who is different from you?
8. What does the story tell about God?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What did Jesus mean when he told Peter to forgive a fellow believer seventy times seven?
2. How is the Christian to react when a fellow believer does him wrong?
3. The reconciliation process involves what stages?
4. What promise does Jesus give to people who come together seeking reconciliation?
5. Explain what happened in the parable of the Unmerciful Debtor.
6. How does the parable of the Unmerciful Debtor express Jesus' teaching on forgiveness?
7. What happens when a Christian refuses to show mercy and forgive a fellow believer who wronged him?
8. Who has extended the most forgiveness to you?
9. How can you forgive others the same way God has forgiven you?

## LIFE-LESSONS

1. **Jesus gives guidelines for seeking reconciliation between his followers.** Jesus was concerned about relationships between his followers. He explained how a believer was to react when another believer did him wrong. Jesus previously told the parable of the Shepherd Seeking the Lost Sheep. Then he made the application showing how his followers demonstrate the Great Shepherd's concern for stray "sheep." If a fellow believer in Christ sinned against you:
  - Go to that person and seek to resolve the problem between the two of you.
  - If the problem remains unresolved, return accompanied by two or three others from the church.
  - If the small group can't resolve the problem, take it to the church (Mat 18:15-17).
  - Anytime the offending person repents, he should be forgiven (Mat 18:15, 21-22).
2. **Believers should always forgive those who are truly repentant, no matter how many times they ask.** That is what Jesus implied when he told Peter to forgive seventy times seven (Mat 18:22).
3. **Jesus is present when Christians come together to restore a broken relationship.** In the context of speaking about seeking reconciliation, Jesus said

if two or three come together in his name, he will be present (Mat 18:19-20). Jesus only promises to be present with believers who come together in agreement to resolve their conflicts.

4. **The main truth of the parable of the Unmerciful Servant is the person who has been forgiven by God should not withhold forgiveness from others.** The fact that God forgives Christians for their wrongdoing should motivate them to forgive fellow believers who wrong them (Mat 18:21-35).
5. **The person who forgives is releasing a debtor from his debt.** Jesus used the image of canceling a debt to illustrate what it is to forgive. The king cancelled the debt of the servant who could not pay his debt (Mat 18:27). The wrongdoer is in debt to the person he wronged. The Christian should forgive the wrongdoer because he recognizes that God forgave him and he should forgive others. The Christian recognizes that the wrongdoer owes him, but he doesn't make the wrongdoer pay, nor try to get even, nor hold a grudge, nor bring it up again.

## LEARNING ACTIVITIES

### Series of Tableaux:

The storyteller narrates the entire Bible story.

Then the storyteller asks for five volunteers to dramatize the story as it is retold. The drama participants will perform a series of frozen images that, together, tell the parable of the Unmerciful Debtor with a beginning, middle, and end. Each drama participant is designated to represent a person from the parable:

- The king.
- The servant, who owed the king billions.
- The servant who owed his fellow servant thousands.
- Two other servants.

The storyteller starts retelling the parable. Drama participants stand around the performance area. When the storyteller pauses narrating, the drama participants interpret the narrated event. They step into the performance area and establish a frozen image in relation to one another until the tableau is complete. This means that they will freeze (stand still) and depict with their facial expressions, hand gestures, and body positions what happened in that scene of the story.

These are the places the storyteller will pause to allow the drama participants to depict the scene with a frozen image:

- The king took pity on the servant who owed him billions, canceled the debt, and let him go.
- The forgiven servant refused to forgive the debtor who owed him money. Instead, he had the debtor thrown into prison until the debt was paid. The other servants saw what happened; they were outraged.
- The king was angry and turned the unmerciful servant over to the jailers to be tortured until he could pay back his entire debt.