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## ***The Parable of the Wicked Servant (Mt 18:23-35)***

*by Nicholas Tuohy, Kew Baptist Church, 27 July, 2014*

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Jesus' parable addresses one of the most important subjects that human beings need to address. Everything in your life and the lives of everyone on the planet pivots on what Jesus is talking about in the parable. Nations rise and fall because of it. Families are ripped apart or reconciled because of it. Marriages are made or broken because of it. Friendships and workplaces are healthy or sick upon the basis of it.

And what is it that is central to life and this parable of Jesus?

**Forgiveness.**

**ONE Big Idea: As God has forgiven you, so you must forgive others...but on what grounds?**

The BIG Picture of a fallen and disgraced humanity in desperate need of God's pardon. Over 2500 years ago, God promises a new covenant, or agreement, with humanity. It promises a new level of intimacy with God and the forgiving of humanity's sin:

Jeremiah 31:34 (NIV)

34 No longer will they teach their neighbour,  
or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,'  
because they will all know me,  
from the least of them to the greatest,"  
declares the LORD.  
"For I will forgive their wickedness  
and will remember their sins no more."

In speaking of the coming of the Messiah, the Gospel of Luke states that he will save us by forgiveness:

Luke 1:76–77 (NIV)

<sup>76</sup> And you, my child [John the Baptist], will be called a prophet of the Most High;

for you will go on before the Lord [Jesus] to prepare the way for him,

<sup>77</sup> to give his people the knowledge of salvation

through the forgiveness of their sins,

### **The Mathematics of forgiveness**

1. There are only ever 3 players: God, the offended and the offender. This can be individual and communal; nations can
  - a. We have all offended God and violated his justice and righteousness

- b. We all need God's pardon and forgiveness
- c. We have all been sinned against, and need to work towards reconciliation, redress and forgiveness of those who have wronged us.
- d. We have all wronged others and need to repent and seek forgiveness

### **This Parable of Jesus covers them all**

- **The Parable**

Look at what precedes the Parable of the Wicked Servant:

Matthew 18:15–20 <sup>15</sup>“If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. <sup>16</sup>But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ <sup>17</sup>If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

I would argue that Jesus is talking here solely of our relationships with other Christians (Brother and sister)

### **The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant**

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

<sup>22</sup> Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

<sup>23</sup> “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup> As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. <sup>25</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> “At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ <sup>27</sup> The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

<sup>28</sup> “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

<sup>29</sup> “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’

<sup>30</sup> “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.

<sup>31</sup> When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

<sup>32</sup> “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. <sup>33</sup> Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ <sup>34</sup> In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

<sup>35</sup> “**This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”**

**GAMECHANGER and Shift in my thinking this week: God does not forgive unrepentant and unremorseful people. Neither do we have to. Look at the story, both indebted parties ASK for mercy. Jesus condemns the first servant on his unwillingness to forgive (cancel the debt) in the light of the second servant asking for mercy.**

In this parable Jesus is stating that we are indebted to God and need his pardon and forgiveness. God is willing and God provides a way. Then, we are called to live in the light and spirit of what God has done for us.

If we don't we jeopardise our standing with God. This is not a conditional or works-based forgiveness from God; but it shows that we have no right not to extend mercy and forgiveness to our repentant debtors.

How does God forgive us? With no confession or repentance on our part? No. Then we should do the same. To demand that a person forgive the sins of others without repentance and remorse on behalf of the other is to condone and support injustice and the violation of the aggrieved person.

Both parties in the Parable clearly have debts. Right? Both parties clearly beg and ask for mercy, right?

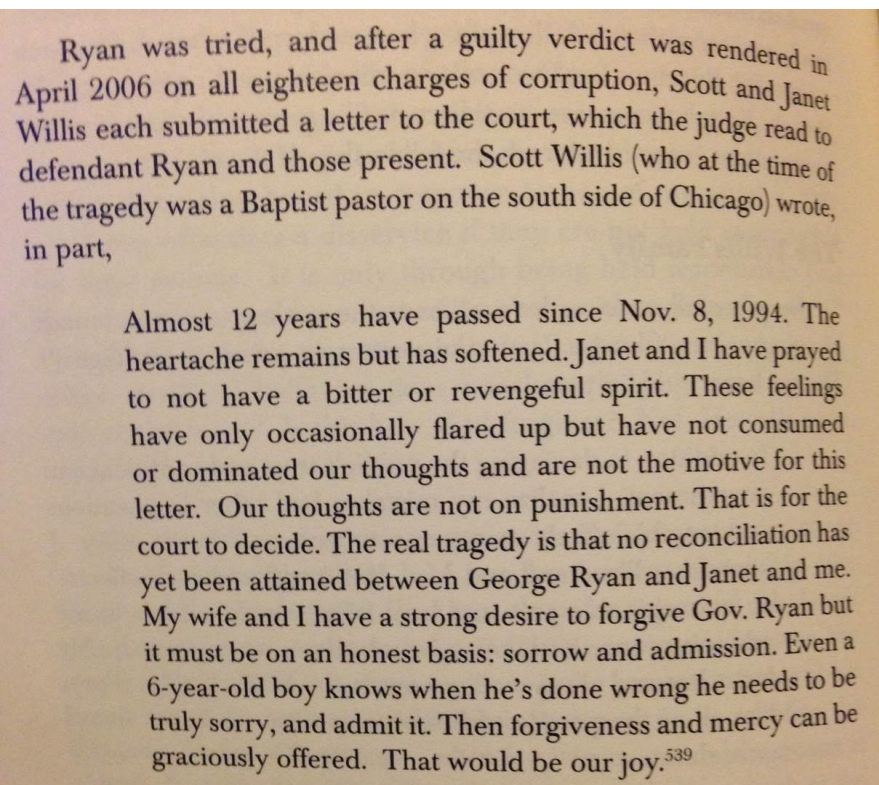
While we need to always cultivate and live in a posture and willingness to forgive and be merciful, and while we must let go of and work through the subjective emotions surrounding being sinned against, such as retribution, hate, resentment and anger...

Forgiveness, as it is a cancelling and cleansing of debt, can only be granted to one whom confesses to the wrongdoing, is sorry for it, and desires your forgiveness. Many times, I suggest, people think they have forgiven their offender, when in fact, they have only let go of the right for vengeance and the seething anger for retribution. There can be no true and complete forgiveness until, and only when, the offending party admits the wrong, is sorry for it, and asks for this gift.

### **Story of the Willis Family**

IN 2006 ex-Governor of Illinois, George Ryan, was convicted on a number of fraud and corruption charges related to his time as Governor. Among the cluster of crimes, one was the granting of truck licences to untrained, often illegal immigrants, in return for cash payments which went to fund Gov Ryan's election campaigns. One of those truck drivers with no qualifications crashed his truck into the family car of Scott and Janet Ryan. The crash engulfed 6 of their children in a blaze that killed them. The lives of Benjamin, 13, Joseph, 11, Samuel, 9, Hank 6, Elizabeth, 3 and Peer, 6 weeks, were tragically cut short by the negligence of a driver who was only on the road due to Gov Ryan's illegal kickback scheme.

This is what Scott Willis, a Baptist Pastor, wrote in response to George Ryan being charged:



Scott and Janet Willis are right, I believe to be willing to offer forgiveness, and desire to show mercy, but also correct in that this forgiveness can only be 'transacted' when George Ryan admits his wrongdoing and apologises. If he does, it is not up to the Willis', or anyone else, to judge the sincerity of his confession; that's up to God. But they are right to say that forgiveness cannot be extended where there is no admission of guilt and sorrow for wrong actions.

Jesus teaches elsewhere about the command to forgive, but we do so on the basis of how God forgives. Technically and provisionally Jesus' death for our sins is available to every human being alive. However, it is only enacted and received when a person repents and asks for God's mercy. In the same way, when people apologise for their sins against us and admit they got it wrong, Jesus commands us to forgive and show mercy.

Matthew 6:12–15 (NIV)

12 And forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors...

14 For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

### **What Human Forgiveness is not?**

1. Forgiveness is not denying the needs and rights to justice. It is not ignoring hurt and loss, but addressing and confronting it with forgiveness and reconciliation in mind. Forgiveness does not override divine justice- The perpetrator may get your forgiveness but not God's
2. Forgiveness is not necessarily forgetting
3. Forgiveness happens at a point in time, but is often a series of points in time.
4. Forgiveness does not equal reconciliation. You can forgive someone and refuse any relationship with them (rape)
5. You can't force or require someone to forgive; it is only ever a personal decision.
6. Forgiveness is always public and social
7. You can let go of the right to vengeance, resentment and retribution and still, and rightly, not forgive an unrepentant offender
8. Being forgiven does not mean you ignore restitution and redress injustice inasmuch as it is in your power to do so; nor does it override legality
9. Overlooking an offence. This does not let the action or issue move to the need for forgiveness. If someone cuts you off on the road and you are angry, you may never see them again and they can't ask for forgiveness. But you can choose to overlook the offence and let it go. No forgiveness needed. We need to be aware of the scale of gravity regarding offences. A casual sarcastic remark that hurts can be overlooked; regular and incessant verbal abuse is another level of hurt that may require repentance by the offender.

### **Why people do not/will not forgive**

1. Self-righteousness and pride. They see themselves as morally and socially superior and believe others deserve punishment and judgement
2. The pain and hurt is too deep and the crime too heinous
3. They are unaware of their own sins and great need for God's forgiveness (the unforgiven do not forgive)
4. Resentment and bitterness
5. The desire for vengeance and retribution
6. The offender is not aware of the offense or unknown (war), or deceased.
7. They are not asked to by a person who has hurt them

### **NT WRIGHT**

Forgiveness is more like the air in your lungs. There's only room for you to inhale the next lungful when you've just breathed out the previous one. If you insist on withholding it, refusing to give someone else the kiss of life they may desperately need, you won't be able to take any more in yourself, and you will suffocate very quickly. Whatever the spiritual, moral and emotional equivalent of the lungs may be (we sometimes say 'the heart', but that of course is a metaphor as well), it's either open or closed. If it's open, able and willing to forgive others, it will also be open to receive God's love and forgiveness. But if it's locked up to the one, it will be locked up to the other.<sup>1</sup>

“Conduct in the community of disciples called “the church” is to be patterned after the mercy and grace of God's free forgiveness of sins—which is an important basis for the very existence of the community. As God freely forgives those who have sinned against him, so are disciples to freely forgive those who sin against them. In both instances the repentance of the sinner is assumed. The failure to forgive one who is repentant casts doubt on the genuineness of a person's discipleship. The refusal to forgive others will be reflected upon the disciple in God's refusal to forgive him or her. Thus, in keeping with the thrust of the larger discourse, we see again the high importance of a person's conduct toward other members of the community. The community must treat its members as God treats them. Failure in this respect creates an intolerable inconsistency at the very point where the kingdom is to manifest itself: in the community of the redeemed, living in a fallen world.”<sup>2</sup>

- **Application**

Imagine what our relationships would look like if we took Jesus seriously? Our workplaces, family, friendships? Imagine what a church community would look like. WE ARE SO VERY POOR AT THIS!!!!

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, T. (2004). *Matthew for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 16-28* (39–40). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

<sup>2</sup> Hagner, D. A. (1998). *Vol. 33B: Matthew 14–28*. Word Biblical Commentary (540–541). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

## **Conclusion:**

Jesus teaches here: You need to be, and must be, forgiven by God for your unpayable debt to him. You are to live out of this gift a lifestyle of grace and mercy towards others. A failure to do so jeopardises your own forgiveness and standing with God.

BUT...Jesus does not teach that unrepentant and unremorseful people are to be granted your forgiveness. You are to let go of anger, resentment, and the 'right' to retribution. You are to desire mercy and love and work towards it. But forgiveness can only be granted to repentant and remorseful people. We can and must, as disciples of Jesus, live with hearts willing and ready to forgive. In fact, even when no repentance and apology has been offered, we can still live and act *as though* we forgive; but forgiveness, in the way the Bible describes it, is always anchored in the concrete actions of repentance and remorse.

## **More Scripture to Meditate and Discuss:**

### **Light and Darkness, Sin and Forgiveness**

<sup>5</sup>This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. <sup>6</sup>If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. <sup>7</sup>But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

<sup>8</sup>If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. <sup>9</sup>If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. <sup>10</sup>If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.

**2** My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. <sup>2</sup>He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. 1 John 1:5–2:2 (NIV)

## **Some Things to Discuss:**

- What would it look like if the church practiced forgiveness like this? Would it look the same as it does now or would it be different?
- Do you think we sometimes confuse the emotions around forgiveness, such as resentment, anger, sorrow and vengeance, with forgiveness itself? So when we say, "I have forgiven them," and the other party has never said sorry or admitted the wrong, might we instead be only rightly letting go of the emotions around the hurt?
- In the light of how Jesus and the Scriptures describe forgiveness, can you privately "forgive someone in your heart"? As an analogy, can you "marry someone in your heart"?
- What would our relationships, indeed our world, look like if we took what Jesus teaches in this parable about forgiveness seriously and acted upon it?
- So...Do you know the beautiful and liberating forgiveness of God? He will forgive you...IN CHRIST
- Do you need to seek the forgiveness of someone else?
- Do you need to seek to forgive another person?