

File No. 130

MATTHEW 18:21–35

A LESSON ABOUT FORGIVING (AN UNFORGIVING SERVANT)

(SBS Bk 5 Story No 12)

Story Notes

The disciples needed to understand the kingdom of God, and this had much to do with receiving and giving of mercy and the humility associated with receiving it. Three people had come to Jesus as King or Messiah and had sought mercy (9:27; 15:22; 20:30f). Clearly, mercy was important in the kingdom, but it was not popularly understood (9:13; 12:7; 23:23). The disciples also had problems with mercy.

The events before the telling of this parable show that Peter was confronted with the reign of God's mercy in Christ. He had rightly understood that the reasons for going to someone with a complaint was not to get justice but that none of Christ's 'little ones' should be lost (v. 14), or the regaining of the one that had offended (v. 15). The reason for taking another witness or for involving the whole church was primarily to persuade the person to turn from their offensive and damning behaviour. Christ would be in their midst to this end.

Peter wanted to discover the boundaries of God's mercy. Rabbis taught that a repeat offender could be forgiven three times and Peter probably thought himself generous in offering seven times. The idea of open-ended forgiveness opened the prospect of him being abused beyond reason.

Jesus alluded to the anger of Lamech who said he would be avenged seventy times more than any enemy of his forefather Cain (Gen. 4:15, 24) Jesus was replacing the reign of vengeance with the reign of redemptive mercy. 'Seventy times seven' did not represent a limit but the abundance of mercy in the kingdom.

Through the story of a man wanting 'to settle accounts', Jesus reveals how eager his Father is to have no outstanding debts.

The first man has no chance of repaying his debt. 'Ten thousand talents' could be represented today by 'a billion dollars'. The amounts raised by their being sold as slaves would barely register as the beginning of a repayment of the debt. The man's situation is hopeless and he begs for time to repay everything, a ridiculous proposition. Rather, he is freely forgiven everything. The 'debt' (v.32) is referred to as a 'loan' (v. 27) and written off.

The violence (v.28), vengeance (vv. 29-30) and injustice (v. 31) of this man against a fellow slave highlights the awfulness of his action and his fellow slaves protest.

It was illegal to sell a slave, for at least 500 denarii, when this was more than the amount of his debt.

The action of the first slave is more than unjust. It is 'wicked'. It shows that he has no understanding or participation in the nature of his master's governance.

It is fearful to read the end of this story because Jesus is not concerned to make a fitting end to the story but to tell us the anger that is aroused in his Father (v.35) by a person who has so misjudged the reign of grace under which he or she has come to rest. They have no place in the kingdom of God, and must rather face, not just endless repayment but 'the torturers'.

Peter has learned that if it is hard to forgive, it is harder to contemplate the results of not forgiving his brother from his heart.