

**Venom: Forgiveness: The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, Matthew 18:21-27a****D. The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant****Matthew 18:21-35**

**Matthew 18:21** - Then Peter came and said to Him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?”

Peter’s concern was over the doctrine of forgiveness which our Lord had just taught the disciples. The doctrine is mentioned in a parallel passage found in:

**Luke 17:3** - Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.

**Luke 17:4** - And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you forgive him.

Peter wants to nail down some limit to this procedure and thus wants to know if eight is enough. The Lord realizes that Peter wants to put constraints on grace so he then teaches the doctrine of forgiveness in the form of a parable.

A parable, according to **Unger’s Bible Dictionary [s.v. “Parable” p. 823]** is the ...

*... placing of one thing beside another, an example by which a doctrine or precept is illustrated.*

Thus, a parable is a story taken from the current Zeitgeist which is designed to illustrate a point. The details of the parable are not to be overly emphasized theologically. From it we are to learn a major doctrinal principle, not observe technical spiritual parallels.

**Matthew 18:22** - Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.”

Peter wanted to establish a numerical limit on forgiveness so that he could feel justified to retaliate at some point. The number seven times 70, which equals 490, is a number very familiar to the Jews. It reminds them of Daniel’s seventy weeks mentioned in Daniel 9.

This passage is probably one of the most important prophecies found the Old Testament. The Jewish people understood this passage as a prophecy outlining the remaining period of time before the arrival of the Kingdom Age.

**Daniel 9:24** - Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your holy city ...

The word “weeks” is the Hebrew word *SHEBUA*. It is translated by the KJV and the NAS as “weeks,” while the NIV uses “sevens.” The best English word to convey the idea of *SHEBUA* is “heptad.”

Heptad: From the Greek *heptas* meaning “the number 7 collectively.” It is used in English to describe any group of seven, e.g., a week may be called a heptad.

In Daniel 9:24 we see the term, “*Seventy weeks...*” or “*Seventy sevens...*” Again, the Hebrew word is *SHEBUA* and means *heptad*. Therefore, the literal translation is “*Seventy groups of seven...*” Therefore, a corrected translation might read: “*Seventy groups of seven years...*” or, “*Seventy heptads of years...*” or in English, “*Four-hundred and ninety years ...*”

Without going into a detailed analysis of this passage let me for the moment give you a summary:

In Daniel 9, Daniel prays that God would reveal to him the future of Israel following her 70 years of Babylonian captivity. The Seraph Gabriel is assigned the duty and gives Daniel an outline of Israel’s history beginning with its release from Chaldean rule.

The event which, according to Gabriel, set Israel’s national clock to ticking was a decree by King Artaxerxes Longimanus mentioned in Nehemiah 2:8. Archaeologists have determined that this official decree allowing the Jews to return to the land was dated March 14, 445 B.C. From that date, Israel was promised a period of 490 years to function as a nation before the end of its dispensation, at which time the Messiah would arrive to set up His Kingdom reign.

Therefore, in the mind of the Jew, 490 was a number which held great significance. It spoke of the totality of their nation’s history and thus implied “*to the very end.*” When the Lord said to Peter, “*seventy times seven,*” Peter immediately understood its implication: there is no limit on a mental attitude of forgiveness.

**Matthew 18:23** - “*For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a certain king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.*”

The certain king is symbolic in the parable of God. The settling of accounts is His reconciliation of the books. Those who owe nothing, have fellowship. Those who owe anything do not.

**Matthew 18:24** - *And when he had begun to settle them, there was brought to him one who owed him ten thousand talents.*

In this parable, Christ is attempting to teach Peter and the others about the standards upon which one believer deals with another who has offended him. Before we can develop a genuine mental attitude of forgiving our fellow believer, we must know and appreciate the ultimate example of forgiveness.

The Lord seeks to first of all put things in perspective. He presents a man who owes the king (or God) more than he could ever repay in a lifetime. There are several ways expositors could calculate the amount this man owed the king. Dependent upon which system of measurement and of what type metal the talents were made, the amount owed was somewhere between one and ten million dollars.

The implication the Lord seeks to convey is that our sin in the face of God’s righteousness creates a debt we can never repay. Without any alternative, the king is forced by the circumstances to enforce the penalty for nonpayment.

**Matthew 18:25** - *But because he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made.*

This man and his family are classified as slaves. The king in order to acquire payment decides to sell them and all they own in the open market. But that will not come close to retiring the debt.

This manner of retiring debts was the custom of the times as is noted in:

**2 Kings 4:1** - Now a certain woman ... cried out to Elisha, “Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that your servant feared the Lord; and the creditor has come to take my two children to be his slaves.”

It becomes apparent that the legal avenues for retiring debt in the ancient world incorporated no measure of grace, even when enslaving an entire family couldn't even come close to putting a dent in it. However, in the Lord's parable the king is going to offer a grace solution which will drive home the major point of the Lord's message.

**Matthew 18:26** - The slave therefore falling down, prostrated himself before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.’

**Matthew 18:27** - And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt.

There are three words used by our Lord in these two verses which must be noted. The first is translated “have patience” in Matthew 18:26. It is the aorist active imperative of the verb: *makrothumia* - This is a compound word made up of *makros* which means “long” and *thumos* which, as you well-know, means “anger.” Literally: “long angered.” Of course, we know it as “longsuffering” and the word “patience” is fine as well.

The mood is the imperative of entreaty. The slave is pleading for mercy from the king. However, all he is really doing is groveling seeking to buy himself some time. We know this because he promises more than he can deliver. What we see here is the modus operandi of the Exodus generation. They fell under great pressure, promised God they'd do better, and then, once delivered, return to their old behavior patterns.

The second word we note however is a mental attitude possessed by the king. His servant asked for longsuffering, he responds with “compassion”—our old friend in its verb form:

*splagxhnizomai* - We will forego the explanation about the “healthy intestines” and just remind you it means to have compassion for someone.

With this compassion the king then does the grace thing—he forgives his slave of the entire debt. There is no way that we can do anything to pay for our sins. Confession alone to God alone is sufficient for them to be forgiven. A principle emerges which will come into play in the next few verses. It is found in:

**Luke 12:48b** - ... from everyone who has been given much shall much be required.

This reminds us of our duty towards our fellow believer as is stated in Ephesians 4:32 and in Colossians 3:13:

**Ephesians 4:32** - ... keep forgiving each other just as God also by means of Christ has forgiven you.

**Colossians 3:13** - ... just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.

The third word we'll note is also in Matthew 18:27, the word for forgiveness of the believer through rebound: *aphiemi* - “forgave.”