

Forgiveness is one of the key parts of the Christian faith. Forgiveness is why we have hope as Christians. And forgiveness is one of the great ways in which we show God's love to those around us, both fellow Christians and unbelievers. The parable Jesus tells in our Gospel text is one of the great Biblical passages on forgiveness, and in it we see two main things about forgiveness. First, we see just how much our Lord has forgiven us. And second, we see how we are to forgive others.

Jesus begins by telling of a king who is settling accounts with his servants. These servants apparently had been entrusted with some part of their master's business, and now they are being brought in to see just what they've done with that.

One of the first brought in was quite the doozy. We read, "one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents." What exactly is ten thousand talents? Well, a talent is roughly equal to five thousand denarii, and perhaps you remember, a denarius was a day's wage for a laborer. So, if you crunch the numbers, this might be around six or seven billion dollars today. Billion, with a "b."

This is an incredible, an insane amount of debt for just one person to accumulate. It's obviously not just the result of one single mistake, but would reflect many, many bad decisions over a period of time. It's repeated, it's careless, it may very well even be malicious. It also shows an abuse of trust. We don't know what exactly this particular servant's role or job was in the king's house, but clearly the king had entrusted him with considerable resources or authority. Yet the man had used that trust to cause great harm to his master.

So what does the master do? "Since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made." This man and everything and everyone he has will be sold. Perhaps that seems overly harsh, but I guarantee you that, whatever they would've been sold for, it wouldn't come anywhere close to covering the amount of the debt.

Stop and think about what Jesus is telling us about our own sins here. They're a big deal. Jesus says this because He knows our sinful human nature. When confronted with our sins, what is one of the things we are tempted to do? To minimize them, to say that yes, they were wrong, but they're not that serious. They're mistakes, or poor choices, but "sins"? That's a little harsh, don't you think?

Yet this parable demolishes that idea. Our sins rack up incredible offense and guilt against God's holiness. We can't see that debt, sort of like the servant couldn't see the physical silver talents he was owing, but it's there all the same. Nothing we have or do can hope to pay back the debt of our sin to God, either. Even if you could stop sinning at this moment and live perfectly from this moment on, that wouldn't actually make up for anything. That would merely be doing what is required.

One more point we should make is that, like the servant's debt, our sins are an abuse of God's trust. Everything we have is a gift from the gracious God, and so when we sin, we are taking those things with which God has entrusted us and using them against Him.

Back in the parable, the servant facing the loss of everything begins begging his lord. “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” If you think about it, this is an utterly ridiculous statement, for at least two reasons. Number one: as the servant had already greatly abused his master’s trust, the master would be a fool to trust him to actually do the right thing now. And number two: there is no way by which the man could actually pay him back. Even if the man worked every day, he owes around 50,000,000 days’ worth of labor. That’s not quite 137,000 years of work. – without taking a vacation. The man is in such dire straits that he’s blubbering nonsense to his lord, who has every right to take all he has.

And yet, the king has pity on the man. He sees this servant weeping, this servant who has cost him so much, and he is moved to compassion. That compassion is the servant’s deliverance. Jesus says, “And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.” That compassion leads the king to have the servant let go, back to his wife, his children, his stuff – his life.

And what’s more, he forgives the debt. The king doesn’t say he’s going to garnish the man’s wages until he dies, or even set up a partial repayment plan or something. He clears the man’s ledger. Thousands of talents, billions of dollars, all forgiven.

This is even more incredible when you realize that debt can’t actually be wiped out. It merely gets shifted to someone else. In this case, the king clears the debt from the slave by taking it on himself. He will be responsible for making good all the costs the servant had accumulated, for seeing that every price that must be paid is paid. It’s crazy for a king to do such a thing for a servant, but such is the compassion and love that this king has.

This is how we are before God. Again, nothing we can do can pay the price for our sins. Nothing could even come close. And the just punishment for those sins is death, both the destruction of our bodies in this life and the eternal destruction of our bodies and souls in hell. Yet despite the Lord God having every right to condemn us to this fate, He instead has pity on us. In mercy, He wipes away the debt of our sins. Every sin, every trespass, gone.

Like with monetary debt, He doesn’t just snap His fingers or make a pronouncement from heaven that the debt doesn’t just exist anymore. No, He takes our sins away by bearing them Himself upon the cross. The suffering and death of the body, the divine wrath and torment of hell upon the soul – that’s what Jesus received as He hung there. That’s why in the Catechism we confess that we are redeemed “not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death.”

If you’re ever tempted to think that your sins are no big deal, remember that God Himself had to die in order to atone for them. And if you’re ever tempted to think that what you’ve done is so horrible that nothing could ever make it right, remember that God Himself has had compassion on you and has given His very life to win you back to Him.

Having received this compassion and love and forgiveness from our Lord, how then should we live toward others? Or, as the parable makes clear, how then must we live toward others? Jesus

teaches here with a negative example, showing something we are tempted toward, and the terrible consequences of what happens if we take that route.

The king has just set the servant free and taken on his incredible debt. In effect, he's given the man a new life. What does the servant do? Go home and hug his life and kids? Excitedly tell others what a gracious king he serves? Resolve to do better with his master's money? Nope. We hear, "But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.'"

This is awful on so many levels. Right away, we see that the compassion and love that the king has shown to this man are not being reflected in the man's heart. The servant goes out and immediately uses his newfound freedom to hunt down someone who owes him. Instead of compassion, we see pride, a desire to get what's "rightly" his.

We see also that this debt is much smaller. Sure, a hundred denarii are nothing to sneeze at, but this is roughly 500,000 times smaller than the debt that was just forgiven him. This would be like someone paying off a million dollars of debt for you and then you go out and beat someone up because he hasn't given you back the two bucks he borrowed to get a soda from the vending machine last week. And speaking of beating him up, notice too that the servant doesn't just demand his money back. No, in anger he seizes him and begins to choke him, essentially threatening to kill him.

In response, the fellow servant falls down and begs the servant for patience, promising to repay. This is the same thing the first servant had said to the king, but with one notable difference. In this case, it's not a completely unreasonable promise. Sure, it might take a while, but a hundred days' wages is within the realm of possibility.

But to this prideful, angry servant, it doesn't matter. Jesus says, "He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt." When report of this gets back to the king, the king is justly enraged and has the wicked servant brought before him. He thunders, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?"

With that, the king has the servant thrown in prison, never to get out. Because the servant has refused to show mercy and forgive his fellow servants, he has thereby rejected the mercy and forgiveness of the king, and as such is back under the debt that the king's forgiveness had taken away.

Therein lies the stern warning which Jesus gives in this parable. If we refuse to show mercy and forgiveness to those who ask it of us, we are then refusing the mercy and forgiveness that God has shown to us upon the cross.

What does this mean in our lives as Christians, then? For one, we acknowledge that other people sin against us. Jesus isn't telling us this parable to tell us just to suck it up when others wrong us. One hundred denarii was a considerable debt. Other people do sin against us in serious and hurtful ways. But what do we do with that? We shouldn't just ignore it, trying to bottle it up inside. But neither should we think that we are entitled to vengeance and our pound of flesh. Doing so just fuels

our pride and anger, growing sin within us and harming our faith. It's like having an ulcer on your soul that you make bigger and bigger.

Our sinful flesh likes feeling angry – just consider most of the headlines and news topics and clickbait in our social media feeds. But if left unchecked, that anger can and will destroy our salvation. As Jesus plainly states after concluding the parable, “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” There is no grudge worth holding in exchange for enduring the unimaginable torments of hell for all eternity.

That's why we forgive. When we forgive, we are giving the relatively small debts that are owed to us to the God who has born the debt of all humanity – including our own. And in return, our Lord gives us grace to heal our souls from the anger and pride and resentment that would eat away at them. When we forgive, God the Holy Spirit uses us to show His love to others. His forgiveness, which He gives us to be our forgiveness, repairs relationships and brings healing to our congregations, our communities, our society.

Forgiving can be a very hard thing to do. It may very well require forgiving someone in our hearts over and over again, apart from actually saying the words out loud. But our Lord has promised us the strength to do this. When we sincerely pray, “and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us,” the Spirit works to remind us of just how much the Father has forgiven us for the sake of Jesus, and through this helps us to forgive.

When we forgive, we get to live out the words of Christ: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”

In the name of Jesus, amen.