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The National Presbyterian Church

The Price of Mercy

(The Parable of The Unmerciful Servant)

Matthew 18:23-35

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In our sermons through the spring and into the summer we are looking together at the teaching of our Lord Jesus, and in particular the stories that Jesus tells that we call parables.

These are stories which are intended to explain spiritual truth. Sometimes spiritual truth may be hard or complicated to understand, and sometimes there's an object out there which Jesus is able to use, some kind of a comparison, in order to explain this spiritual truth. Sometimes when he does this, when he tells these parables, he does so very clearly to clarify, to make it easier to understand. But it would be a mistake to think that that was the only reason why Jesus told the parables.

There were certainly times when Jesus clarified spiritual truth with a story, with an illustration, but there were also many times when Jesus didn't do that – at least initially. Initially, instead of clarifying he cajoled. Initially, instead of clarifying at times he confused. Initially, when he told these stories sometimes he would get a reaction from people, causing them to say, *“Hold on! Wait a minute! What's going on here? I don't understand what you're saying. That's too extreme! You're way out of line here. That's an exaggeration that I cannot live with.”* And if Jesus managed to stir up a reaction like that I think he would have smiled. He would have said “Ah, that's what I wanted. The last thing in the world I want is for you to say ‘oh my, this is just wonderful, this is lovely, I've heard this before, this is great,’” and then for people to walk on their way. He loved to needle people until they began to think.

Some people think that Christianity calls us to commit intellectual suicide, to lay our mind at the door and just to have blind faith – this was the last thing that Jesus wanted. He wants us to love the Lord our God with all our heart and our soul and our mind (Luke 10:27). And the parables were a part of his toolkit in order to help us do this – sometimes to make things easy, sometimes to clarify, sometimes to confuse – always, though, to help those who heard him to grow in faith and in grace.

Sometimes these stories he told came from the world of nature and they did so because he believed that God is the creator – that these stories were an expression of the fact that the creator God infused the whole of creation with spiritual truth which is there for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. In this Jesus follows the psalmist in Psalm 19, who says that “the heavens declare the glory of God. Day to day pours forth speech and so too the night time. There are no words but their voice goes out to all the Earth.” In other words, the psalmist tells us to look at

what God has made and you'll hear the word of God. So Jesus looks at what God has made and he tells stories.

- Sometimes these stories are about nature – and we looked at one of these stories last week. It's called the parable of the sower (or of the seed or of the soil) and it's down to earth, literally: it's about nature, the world that God has created which contains spiritual truth.
- But some of the stories he told have to do not so much with nature but with human society, human relationships with one another.

Jesus is passionate about what he calls the Kingdom of Heaven, the Realm of Heaven, the community that God wants to establish, that we will see fully when we die and we go to Heaven. But he wants this community to exist not only in the future but in the present, and to be embodied in the world right here and now: a community, or kingdom, with God as the king. And Jesus says "You know what? Even though our human community is imperfect it too contains spiritual truth. Not only through the perfection of our relationships, but sometimes also through the imperfection of our relationships, there is a message there that God wants us to see.

And today's parable, the story that we heard read just a moment or two ago falls into this particular category. It's about relationships in the world in which Jesus lived, and the society in which he lived: a story that we call the parable of the unmerciful servant or slave.

Now this is a story that Jesus teaches because of a question raised by his friend Simon Peter. If we go back a verse or two from our passage of scripture (to Matt.18:21-22) we would find Simon Peter, Jesus' friend, coming to Jesus and saying, "*Jesus I know you're interested in human community, you're interested in the kingdom of God, you're interested in the church and how people can live with each other, but it's not going to work unless we learn to forgive each other. So how often do we need to forgive each other? How many times do we need to do this?*" And Peter thinks he's being very generous, and we'd say very Christian, when he says to Jesus, "Do we need to forgive *seven times?*" You know, once is hard, twice is harder, three times and I'm beginning to think I won't forgive again after that. So he says, "*seven times*"?

And Jesus floors him, makes him pause, stop in his tracks. He says "No, not seven times. You need to forgive seventy-seven times" (or some translations put it "seventy times seven" times). It's to be unlimited, so many times that you can't even count. This is how much you are to forgive. And Simon Peter would have been stunned by that; and all those who were hearing this conversation would be stunned by that. How in the world can we do this?

The issue of forgiveness raises all kinds of questions about people getting away with what they ought not to get away with. So Jesus illustrates his reasoning through this parable, but, and this is very important – he does not explain how to apply forgiveness in every situation.

The parables are limited. They have one or two messages in them. They don't cover every situation. And in this case this parable simply doesn't tell us what to do if in fact somebody is really hurting our family, or if there is a terrorist around. But what it does do is provide us with an illustration that sets us on the right path, without robbing us of the responsibility of figuring out how to apply his teaching to real situations in life.

So Jesus, tells a story which shows why he thinks that mercy should be unlimited, should be more expansive, more extensive than you could ever imagine. So here's the story he tells –

It's a story about a king and about a slave. And the slave owes the king an enormous amount of money. Now the enormity of the debt he owes is hidden in the text because it speaks in terms of an ancient category of money called a talent. And this slave owes 10,000 talents (if we were to translate that currency into our modern dollar, we would say he owed about six million dollars).

This is a huge amount of money. And we might say well, "How could a slave ever owe his master, his owner, his king this amount of money? Well back in the ancient world, especially in Rome, there were different kinds of slaves. Some of the slaves were what we might call "blue collar workers." Some of them were "white collar workers." Some of them rose quite high up the ranks within Roman society and held positions of great responsibility – and that seems to be the case for this particular slave, who seemed to be a business or investment advisor for the king. He held some kind of a role where he controlled the king's resources and he would have a responsibility to keep the king in touch, to let the king know what was going on. But he didn't. Not a word was shared until the king called everybody to account. He trusted this slave. He wasn't just calling this particular slave to account. He was calling all of his slaves to account and it was in that context where this particular one could hide no longer how he had squandered the resources of his master.

And so out of the blue, much to his surprise, the king discovers that this man has lost six million dollars and he must respond. This is a king who is concerned with justice. He must respond and this man needs to be punished. Something needs to happen. He decides to sell him. He decides to sell his family. There are implications all the way down the line. And he effectively tells the slave that he'll have to spend the rest of his life paying off this debt. Even then though, after a lifetime, he'll never pay it off or pay it back. The loss is too large. It would take 100 or 200 years to pay off a debt this size. But for the rest of his life he'll be doing this.

This man has, in other words, basically forfeited all of his life when the king discovers what he has done. And he now has nothing to lose. He gets down on his knees and he pleads for mercy. He cries, he begs for mercy. And then the king responds in a way which would have caused Jesus' audience to take a big breath – to say "you're kidding. This is unrealistic. This could never have happened." In fact, the response is there in just one verse in our story. It seems so small, so quick, we read over it so quickly. Three responses, in fact. They're just piled on top of each other, three responses from this king. And each of them is, in a sense, unbelievable. It's part of Jesus' twist in the story.

(1) The first thing that the king does is to show pity to the slave. He shows pity to the slave. Now, really, it's the slave who should be showing pity to the master! He's just lost million dollars of his master, his king's resources. He should feel his master's pain. But the story tells us that the master, the king, the lord, feels the pain of this slave who has done him wrong. The word for pity could also be translated compassion. And it comes from a word which means his gut was moved. He felt it here. The king is moved by the pain of the slave. People say "Well that's never going to happen!" – but it happens in the story.

(2) And then we're told that he releases this slave. He releases this slave. Some people will say he releases him from jail. But actually we're not told he was in jail. It could just as easily be (and I read it this way) that he releases him from slavery. He not only doesn't put him in jail, and not only doesn't sell him and his family, he releases him. He lets him go. And people would say

“Well, that, too, is outrageous. This would never happen. I mean the man lost six million dollars.” But he does this. He has pity on him, he releases him. And then he does a third thing.

(3) He forgives him for the debt. He forgives him all the debt. Now the word forgiveness there in Greek is one that I’ve shared with you before. Its *aphiēmi*; A-p-h-i-ē-m-i. And it means not just “forgive,” but “let go.” He just lets it go. This debt, the six million dollars, he lets it go, he writes it off. And he not only writes it off on paper, but he writes it off in his mind. He, he’s not going to think about this again. He’s not going to let it get to him again; he writes it off.

And so now the slave owes nothing. He is free to go, having stirred the compassion of the king, his owner. And at that point, people listening to the story would be waiting for the response of this slave. I mean there needed to be some response. He can’t pay it all back, that’s not the issue. He has no obligation to pay back. But there needs to be some kind of response to the enormity of what has been done for him. A response to the giver of the gift.

You know, like a parent with a child who has just been given a gift by somebody else. To begin with maybe there’s no response from the child – just a taking of the gift with no response or eye contact; the focus only on the gift but not the giver. And the parent goes, ‘Say thank you! Say thank you! Just say something! When a gift is given like that, if there’s any relationship at all there needs to be some kind of a response to the giver.

In this case you might not only say he needs to say thank you, but perhaps there should be some emotion in his face. If the king had pity, if he felt for the slave, maybe there should have been some emotional response, some tear, or smile, or look of amazement saying, even without words, “What has happened that this should happen to me, that I should be forgiven?”

And so there could be the response of Thanks – whether it comes in the form of words, or in the unspoken form of an embrace or an expression on the face.

Or there could be the response of a changed life, changed behavior

- Perhaps for the lowest of reasons, because of a sense of relief or fear. As if to say, “*My word, I just dodged a bullet. My life had been taken away and now I’ve been given my life back. I will never come that close to disaster again. I will never come that close again. I’ll change my ways. I really will!*” A response driven by relief and fear.
- Or it could be a life changed because of the golden rule: “*This feeling of being forgiven, I mean I’m getting my life back it’s enormous. I’ve been given this enormous gift; I want to share it with somebody else. I want to do to others what has been done to me.*”

There needs to be some response there. It could be the response of the golden rule.

- Or it could be response of imitation: “*Well if this is the kind of thing that the king does, and the king has the power to do anything he wants, and even though he’s a king of justice, he decides to forgive me, to use his power, to show me mercy, well, then maybe I should imitate him by the way I live my life?*” That, too, would be a valid response, the response of imitation.
- Or there’s the response of proportion which is linked to imitation: “*Wow. He’s forgiven me more debt than I could ever think of. There are some other people I could think of who “owe me one” . . . (or two or three!), but none of them owe me anything like what I owed the king. If he showed me mercy then in response to that, in proportion, there is no one to whom I can not or must not show mercy.*”

So there were all kinds of ways in which this man could have responded to this gift that was given. Not to pay the king back: he could never do that. But there is still a sense in which there’s

a price for the gift. The price of a relationship: the response of some kind or another to the giver is demanded by the gift.

But what we find as Jesus tells the story is *there is no response given*. There is absolutely no response given. There is just nothing. The *king's* life is turned around by this; *his* emotions are stirred. He shows this enormous mercy and the response at the other end is *nothing*.

It's like (as Seth Godin said recently [March 14, Seth's Blog¹]), somebody is playing ping-pong. And you hit the ball over to the other side and the other person just stands there: you ping and they don't pong! There's no game! And you want to scream "Wait a minute, we're here together, we're at the table together. You've got to do something even if you miss it. You've got to do something." But there's nothing.

And not only is there nothing, when this man has the opportunity to do something he does the wrong thing. He does absolutely the wrong thing. There is no sense of mercy or pity. There is no drive to imitation. There is no reflection on the golden rule. There is no sense of proportion. A fellow slave owes him a pittance. He owes him 100 denari: compared to his 10,000 talents that's 1/600th of what he owed. 1/600th of what he owed!! But he goes up to this fellow slave. He shows him no pity, no compassion. Unlike his master, he feels no pain in this fellow slave. Indeed he causes him pain. He grabs him by the neck. He threatens him to pay every last penny, and that he'll throw him into jail until he does so.

And the king hears. The king hears what happens. And the king responds now in a way which – if his first response caused Jesus' audience to go "Wow that would never happen!" – now causes them to go "Wow, we *hope* this will never happen!" The king withdraws his mercy. He pulls back his mercy to this slave who would not forgive. He pulls it back and then, the scripture says, he tortures him until he pays back every last penny.

To which the crowd would have gone "*Torture him? Now come on. Isn't that a little extreme?*"

To which Jesus would say "*Have I got your attention now? Yes it's extreme but, don't ever forget this point. Don't ever forget this point: that when a gift is given to you, you have to respond. And the gift given to every one of us is so enormous that we have all been called to respond with mercy as we have depended on, needed and been given mercy, called to respond with mercy to others.*"

Yes, there are still many unanswered questions about how to apply the matter of forgiveness, or letting go, in particular situations: we've still got some praying and thinking to do about direct application. But at the foundation our obligation is inescapable: "***Here's the rationale,***" says Jesus: "***You've been forgiven, given a gift by God that is far greater than you can ever repay!***"

And as he shared it, some of those who heard would have realized that Jesus wasn't just speaking out of the blue. He wasn't just speaking out of context, as if he was making up this parable from nothing. Indeed as Jesus tells this story, those who heard him would have begun to hear echoes in it of the story of Ancient Israel. The story that goes through the whole of the history of Ancient Israel.

Sometimes when we hear about the Old Testament scripture we see that God there is often very stern and strong. No different from the king in the story that Jesus tells. And we forget the theme of mercy that goes through the Old Testament as well as the New Testament. Indeed there's one story line filled with mercy which weaves its way through the whole of

the Old Testament, on which, I believe, Jesus was absolutely depending. And it was *the story of Israel's history as slaves in the land of Egypt, crying out to God for mercy*. The people cry out to God, and God's heart is broken by their cry. He responds by coming to Moses and saying "I've heard their cry. I'm sending you to Egypt and you will be the one who will lead them out of slavery, out of the house of bondage, and on their way to the Promised Land." Those phrases, "*you were a slave, you were in the house of bondage, in the house of slavery, but I have redeemed you*" – those phrases, those words are repeated more than 100 times in different places through the pages of the Old Testament scripture.

In the list attached at the end of this sermon, I've picked out about 20 to 25 of those, and I want to read for you a half dozen of them, reflecting the theme of being slaves, of crying for mercy, of being set free, and yet of how this gift of grace must lead to a response, not in an attempt to repay God, but simply to respond appropriately to the gift and the giver.

Exodus 23:9, *You shall not oppress a resident alien. You know the heart of an alien.* [How do they know the heart of an alien?] *Because you were aliens in the land of Egypt.* [This is your story too and don't forget it.]

Or from Leviticus 11:45, *I am the Lord who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall be holy for I am holy.* [This is what I did for you now you must copy me – be holy for I am holy.]

Or from Deuteronomy 13:5, *I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery.* [This is what I have done. I've set you free but not to be without law or morals.] *To turn you to the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. You shall purge the evil from your midst.*

Or again in Deuteronomy 24:17-18, *you shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice. You shall not take a widow's garment in pledge.* [These are the folks at the bottom of the barrel who have no one to go to, who are not networked with anyone. They have no power. And God says you must notice them because when you were like that I noticed you.] *Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there. Therefore I command you to do this.*

Or from the prophet Jeremiah 34:13, 14, *Thus says the Lord the God of Israel. I myself made a covenant with your ancestors when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, saying every seventh year each of you must set your Hebrew slaves free.* [Wait a minute, my personal economy depends on them. No, says God, it depends on me. You set them free. You show them mercy] *for you were a slave in the land of Egypt.*

Or from the prophet Micah 6:7, *And what does the Lord require of you? But to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.* [It's beautiful, it's wonderful. But why? Why are we to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with the Lord our God? Well the answer comes in a few verses before that.] (6:4) *For I brought you up from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery.*

It's there again and again and again. It's like a mantra within the faith of Ancient Israel. As if God says, "This is who you were. This is what I did when you cried to me. You can never repay me. That is not the point. But the gift and the relationship require a response. Now here is your response." God did justice. God loved mercy. God humbled himself to help his people when they were in need and they could not help themselves . . . so now you do the same!

This is the story of the Old Testament – and as Christians we have a similar story.

If we go on past the life of Jesus to the early church, they told the story like this. They said

- When we were dead in sin, when we were slaves to sin, when we were powerless to put our lives right with God, when we couldn't help ourselves, when all of our striving, even at our

best, turned into pride, or turned into more failure, at that moment when we were absolutely helpless God came to us.

- When we were not a part of God's ancient community [most of us here today are Gentiles, not a part of God's ancient people], when we were strangers and aliens – and this is the wording that the apostle Paul uses – when we were strangers and aliens to the promises of God and the covenant of Israel, God had mercy on us. We were on the outside and God brought us into the inside through Jesus Christ.
- He sent Jesus to us before we were born to live for us and to die for us. And in his death on the cross, he sent him to pay every debt that we owed to God. As if on the cross, the bill which the king presented to the slave, to his servant, which said “you owe six million dollars” (and one translation says you can't even think of it that way. It really means “gazillions of dollars”), when you owed what you could not pay, Jesus took that bill, nailed it to the cross and stamped on it DEBT PAID IN FULL. Wiped out. Forgotten.

Debt paid in full. That's our story too and the foundation of everything we do, of every moral decision we make, if God did that for us in Christ, if God did that for his ancient people in delivering them from slavery, *then we must respond.*

I can think of no better way of explaining this than in Isaac Watts' wonderful hymn where he says this: *'were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small; love so amazing so divine, demands my soul'* – you know the words – ***'my life; my all.'*** Demands it! It's not payback, it's relationship. It's the nature of a gift which *demands* some kind of a response of gratitude, of relief, of imitation for some reason or another, some response, something must come from us – something must come – my soul, my life, my all.

Jesus would actually say let's not begin with that “my all” bit. That's a little much. Here's where you begin: *you've been given mercy, just pass it on!* You've been given mercy that you cannot repay, but what you can do is pass it on to another. Do not withhold it from one to whom you can show it. And we might go *“Well what about this situation? What about that situation? What about if it happens to my family? What about if a terrorist comes?”* And Jesus would say (at least in this parable) *“That's not the issue just now. The issue is, what is fundamentally motivating you? Who are you copying? Copy God who has given us something that you can never repay.”* Not to repay, no! But in response, yes. If we'd been shown mercy let us be merciful too.

1. http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2013/03/page/2/

THE PRICE OF MERCY: Background Scriptures

Responding to a Free Gift of Love by Obedience

Exodus 20:2; Deut 5:5 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the **land of Egypt**, out of the **house of slavery**; (here follows the Ten Commandments)

Leviticus 11:45 For I am the LORD who brought you up from the **land of Egypt**, to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy.

Leviticus 19:36 You shall have honest balances, honest weights . . . I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the **land of Egypt**.

Deuteronomy 13:5 (Judges 6:8) the LORD your God – who brought you out of the **land of Egypt** and redeemed you from the **house of slavery** – to turn you to the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

By Humility

Deuteronomy 8:14 then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the **land of Egypt**, out of the **house of slavery**,

By Being Merciful

Exodus 22:21 You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the **land of Egypt**.

Exodus 23:9 You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the **land of Egypt**.

Leviticus 19:34 (Deut 10:19) The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the **land of Egypt**; I am the LORD your God.

Leviticus 25:42 For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the **land of Egypt**; they shall not be sold as **slaves** are sold.

Deuteronomy 5:15,14 Remember that **you were a slave** in the **land of Egypt**, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day . . . so that your male and female slaves may rest as well as you . . .

Deuteronomy 24:17-22 You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge. 18Remember that **you were a slave in Egypt** and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this. 19When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. 20When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. 21When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. 22Remember that **you were a slave** in the **land of Egypt**; therefore I am commanding you to do this.

Jeremiah 34:13, 14 (Deut 15:15) Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I myself made a covenant with your ancestors when I brought them out of the **land of Egypt**, out of the **house of slavery**, saying, "Every seventh year each of you must set free your Hebrew slaves . . .

Micah 6:4,7 For I brought you up from the **land of Egypt**, and redeemed you from the **house of slavery**; 7 . . . and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

By Remembering, Celebrating and Returning

Exodus 23:15 (34:18; Deut 16:12) You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread; as I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of **Egypt**.

Deuteronomy 6:12, 21 take care that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of the **land of Egypt**, out of the **house of slavery**. 21then you shall say to your children, "We were Pharaoh's **slaves** in **Egypt**, but the LORD brought us out of **Egypt** with a mighty hand.

Daniel 9:15 "And now, O Lord our God, who brought your people out of the **land of Egypt** . . . we have sinned, we have done wickedly.

Forgetting and Rebelling Against the Gift of Mercy

Exodus 14:11-12 (Ex.17:3; Num20:5, 21:5) They said to Moses, What have you done to us, bringing us **out of Egypt**? . . . For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."

Exodus 32:1 When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the **land of Egypt**, we do not know what has become of him."

2 Kings 17:7(9:9) Samaria was conquered . . . because the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of the **land of Egypt** from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They had worshiped other gods

Nehemiah 9:17 they refused to obey, and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them; but . . . determined to return to their **slavery in Egypt**. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you did not forsake them.

Psalms 106:7 (Jer 31:2) Our ancestors . . . forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in **Egypt**

Ezekiel 20:6-8 6On that day I swore to them that I would bring them out of the **land of Egypt** into a land that I had searched out for them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most glorious of all lands. 7And I said to them, Cast away the detestable things your eyes feast on, every one of you, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt; 8But they rebelled against me and would not listen to me;

Amos 2:6, 10 Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals— 10Also I brought you up out of the **land of Egypt**, and led you forty years in the wilderness . . .

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