

**“Not a Lesson – but an Invitation”**

I would bet that every single person here knows this parable – knows it well enough to tell it.  
And I would also bet that every single person here understands that the message is  
that we should forgive because God forgives us.

The problem is that we have heard this story so often  
that it no longer carries the scandalous message that it did the first time Jesus told it.

We don't know what prompted Peter to ask Jesus that question,  
but we can imagine that perhaps someone had done something to offend Peter,  
and that someone had done something of the sort more than once.

But Peter, who had been following Jesus, traveling with Jesus, listening to Jesus,  
had learned that Jesus loved extravagantly, and wanted others to love extravagantly, too.

At that time, the guiding rule was what we would call “three strikes and you're out”.

So when Peter suggested that perhaps he needed to forgive the offender seven times,  
he was more than doubling the expectation.

He may even have expected Jesus to commend him for his largess.

But instead, Jesus says, “not 7 times, but 70 times 7!”

Obviously, that does not mean 490 times –

because let's face it, no one is going to keep that long and meticulous a log of a person's offenses,  
patiently forgiving each one, until # 491 – and then, bam! – no more forgiveness!

Obviously, Jesus was not speaking literally.

Also, the number 7 that Peter uses, implies complete forgiveness,  
and multiplying sevens takes it to another whole level.

That short reply to Peter might have been enough for Jesus to capture people's attention.

But the clincher is when Jesus tells this parable.

I just heard about a new Bible translation this week called The Passion Translation.

And in that one it says that the man who is brought before the king owed a billion dollars.

Now I don't know about you, but I can't even imagine a billion dollars.

Looking at house prices, and retirement accounts, and endowments

has allowed me to wrap my mind around a million or 2, but even that's a stretch.

And it's one thing to imagine a billion dollars in a retirement or investment account,  
but can you imagine owing a billion dollars?

Well, back in the days of Jesus, if you owed money you were put in prison

and of course, if you were in prison, you were not able to work to earn money,  
so there was no way that you yourself could repay your debt.

The only way you could get out of prison was if someone paid it for you.

So we have this guy brought before the king.

He owes a billion dollars and the punishment for that is that he will be thrown into jail,  
probably for the rest of his life.

But this guy does the unthinkable.

He doesn't ask that the debt be forgiven; instead, he says that he will repay it.

Everybody there, including the king, and, including the man himself, knows that he can't.

So not only has he racked up a billion dollars of debt to the king,

he's now flat out lying about being able to repay it.

And here is where the story is just beyond believable.

Despite the billion dollars that he is owed, despite the fact that this man is flat out lying to him,  
the king forgives the entire debt.

We are talking about two different realms here.

There is the earthly realm of human expectations and numbers and metrics and calculations  
and control and judging and punishing  
and then there is the heavenly realm in which God's love and power  
sweep away the entire measuring system we humans have constructed.

Just think about Jesus & the 5000 hungry people waiting to be touched by Jesus' healing hands. They were hungry, and there were only 5 loaves and 2 fish,

but Jesus didn't stop, count the number of people there, and take out a calculator  
to figure out how many pieces he would have to divide those 5 loaves and 2 fish  
so everyone got a piece.

Jesus simply gave a little of what the disciples had back to them, and said, "feed everybody",  
and they just kept going, breaking off piece after piece after piece, until everyone was fed.

It wasn't about the math.

It was about the extravagant love that God has, and the power that God has  
that goes beyond the numbers, beyond the math, beyond the metrics.

It goes beyond the reasonable, and the rational, and becomes the miraculous.

It goes beyond the natural realm and enters the supernatural realm.

It brings heaven down to earth.

This parable is not just meant to be something that we can process in our minds  
to come up with the moral of the story: we should forgive.

No, it's not a mind thing at all.

This parable invites us to step out of this earthly material natural world  
into a heavenly, spiritual, supernatural world!

It invites us, to step out of our practical predictable world  
and into a world where signs and wonders and miracles abound!

It invites us to let go of our scarcity mentality and adopt a mindset of abundance!

It invites us to leave behind our world of self-centeredness and self-righteousness  
that causes us to judge and convict and condemn others  
and enter into a world in which we are so overwhelmed by God's love  
that the way others treat us scarcely even registers.

The truth of the matter is that God loves you,  
not because of the good things you've done or said, or thought,  
and not even in spite of the bad things that you've done or said or thought.

God loves you simply Because – because God created you, and you are God's child,  
and no matter what you do or you don't do,  
no matter how you succeed or how you fail,  
no matter how righteous or how despicable you are, God loves you.

But here is the point of the parable.

If you're understanding this only in your mind as a fable with a moral  
that says that because you've been forgiven, you should also forgive then you've missed the point.

It's not about intellectual understanding at all, but about experiencing first hand  
what it's like to be so overwhelmed by God's love that nothing else matters.

That's what the poor guy in the parable missed.

He was so focused on how he would repay his debt that he completely missed the fact that he had no more debt.  
He completely missed the experience of overwhelming grace and mercy.

And that's why he left the king's throne room unchanged,

and didn't even make it out of the palace before accosting someone who owed him money.

Obviously, we see that that guy didn't get it.

But the fact of the matter is that many Christians have never gotten it either.

Of course we are all going to make mistakes – hurt each other, betray each other, let each other down –  
but we are only the Church when we have such a profound sense of God’s grace  
that we are able to extend that grace to each other.

If you want to know why congregations are dying,  
it’s because when people see members acting like that guy in the parable,  
accusing and abusing people, disrespecting and dismissing them,  
judging and condemning them, holding onto anger and seeking vengeance,  
then they know that those members do not even know the God of boundless love.

Jesus told this parable not to teach us a lesson,  
but to invite us into a relationship with a king who is totally crazy according to human standards.  
Jesus tells this parable to invite us to encounter and experience  
the overwhelming love and mercy and grace of God.

There’s a contemporary Christian song called Reckless Love that has this refrain:

*Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God!  
Oh, it chases me down, fights ‘til I’m found, leaves the 99  
I couldn’t earn it, I don’t deserve it, still You give yourself away  
Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God!*<sup>1</sup>

Have you experienced that love?

Well, you’ll know you have experienced grace if you have also felt it for another.

If there is someone who has sinned against you, and no matter how deeply they’ve hurt you,  
no matter how badly they’ve failed, no matter how much they deserve punishment,  
no matter what negative thoughts or feelings you may have had toward them,  
and then when you lift them in prayer everything changes  
and the hurt and disappointment and judgment  
and every negative thought and feeling you’ve ever had for them disappears/vanishes  
and you see them as God does,

it’s because you understand that all that matters is what God thinks and feels about you.

And what God thinks and feels about you is love.

When you can look around at all of the people in your life –

your immediate family, your extended family, your church family, your friends, your neighbors –  
and you can feel total love and forgiveness,  
then you know that you’ve stepped into the abundant life to Jesus offers.

Can we live in that place 24/7? I wish!

But once we experience that overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God, then we can all experience it.  
And the more time we spend in that place, then...the more time we will spend in that place!

This parable is not just a math problem.

It’s not just an intellectual concept we are asked to agree with or consent to.

It’s not just a point of doctrine or theology.

This parable is an invitation to bring God’s kingdom down on earth as it is in heaven.

It’s an invitation to step into the realm of God’s forgiveness

which will swallow up every bit of unforgiveness in our own hearts.

It’s an invitation to step out of the world’s indictment and judgement and condemnation  
and into God’s loving arms.

God created you. God forgives you. God loves you.

Not because of your good works and not even in spite of your bad ones.

God loves you simply because He does. Always and forever. No matter what. God loves you. Amen

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<sup>1</sup> Songwriters: Ran Jackson / Cory Asbury / Caleb Culver

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