



PONDERING THE PARABLES_2

Last week we began a series entitled “**Pondering the Parables**” of Jesus with a serious look at the parable of the “*New Patch & New Wine*.” We learned that Jesus and His teaching are incompatible with old ideas, philosophies, and belief systems. Today, we’ll consider one of the Kingdom parables, which are unique in that they illustrate truths about the Kingdom of heaven or the Kingdom of God - which are synonymous terms. These are usually identified by an introductory phrase such as: **“The Kingdom of heaven is like...”**

Imagine for a moment that you are visiting a third world country and the need arises for you to try to describe “*the Magic Kingdom*” of Disney Land to a child who has never seen pictures, let alone videos of the place. They wouldn’t know what a roller coaster or fun house was. They wouldn’t understand funnel cakes, snow cones, or milkshakes either. In fact, the whole idea of an amusement park would be so foreign that you’d be limited to language and illustrations that they could grasp. Maybe you’d be better off to focus on the intangible, but real truths that anyone in any culture could identify with; Like the joy and excitement people experience there. Or the sense of delight and pleasure that fill the atmosphere. You might even say, “*The Magic Kingdom is like...*”

Now, what do the phrases “*kingdom of heaven*” and “*kingdom of God*” represent? Heaven or the people who are subject to the King of heaven? I submit to you that Jesus’ parables about the kingdom are not descriptive of “*a place*,” but of “*principles*” that exist within the hearts of kingdom people – as well as the “*attributes*” of their King. With this mind, listen carefully to Matthew 18:21-35. The text can be found on page 1527 in the pew Bibles.

²¹Peter came to Jesus and asked, **“Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to 7 times?”** ²²Jesus answered, **“I tell you, not 7 times, but 77 times.** ²³**Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.** ²⁴**As he began the settlement, a man who owed him 10,000 talents was brought to him.** ²⁵**Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.** ²⁶**The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’** ²⁷**The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.** ²⁸**But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him 100 denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.** ²⁹**His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’** ³⁰**But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.** ³¹**When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.** ³²**Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to.’** ³³**‘Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’**

34 **In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.** **35** **This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.** So what's the kingdom of heaven like?

It's like a kingdom where **the Master is incredibly Merciful**. He is more forgiving and merciful than any other king on earth has ever been. To help us to grasp the enormity of the amount that the first servant in the parable owed, some versions say his indebtedness was in the millions of dollars. Yet, though the man pleaded for more time to pay this incredible debt – one that he could never possibly pay - the master excused the debt entirely. He didn't even say, "*Well pay me what you can...*" or "*Make payments for the rest of your life.*" No, in this kingdom the Master's forgiveness is free for the asking.

At the close of the parable, Jesus makes it clear who the Master in the story represents. It's His Heavenly Father who is willing to forgive the greatest debts imaginable. From His throne, mercy flows free. Consider the Hebrew writer's quotation (8:12) of God's promise in Jeremiah 31:31-34, when He said He would make a new covenant with His people in which He would, "**Forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more.**" Isn't that great news!

But, the kingdom of heaven is also a kingdom where the Master's forgiveness flows to people, and then flows through people. At least, it is supposed to be.

The servant in the story **withheld mercy**. Though forgiven such a huge debt, he almost immediately seized someone who owed him money, demanding it be paid without delay. Though this servant pleaded in almost an identical fashion, his petition was denied. Not only wasn't he offered "*any grace period*," he wasn't offered any "grace" –period!

This is where the parable takes a turn and the rest of the story is not so palatable. In fact, it may be hard for us to swallow. Reading on, we find that when the word of all this got back to their master, he was furious. So much so, that he confronted this unmerciful man. "**I canceled your debt. Shouldn't you have cancelled his!**" With that, he had him cast into prison "*to be tortured for the rest of his life.*" * Now, we may see the justice in that, but remember who the master represents. It's God the Father.

How can this be? Isn't God's forgiveness unconditional? Isn't His grace a free gift that cannot be revoked? Listen carefully, it's not that the master revoked His forgiveness, so much as **the servant forfeited his mercy**. And like it or not, servants of the Master can do that. This is not hidden away in the small print. Remember that line from **The Lord's Prayer?** "**Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors...**" Then there's Jesus' commentary immediately afterward: "**If you don't forgive men their sins, your Father won't forgive yours.**" God's mercy and forgiveness has never been totally free and unconditional, nor has it come cheap or easy. If you doubt that, consider Jesus as He hung on the cross.

Forgiveness and mercy doesn't come easy for most of us. Yet, our unwillingness to grant it can shut the otherwise open door to the fount of grace which flows from the throne of heaven. Does that mean His love is conditional? No, He loves us no matter what. Is His mercy earned? No, it's totally unmerited. Yet, that doesn't mean that we don't have to ask for it. Remember the servant in the parable "pleaded" for it. **Can we lose it?**

This is a subject of much debate in the Christian community. Some appeal to verses elsewhere found in Scripture to insist that we can't. Romans 11:29 for instance says, **"God's gifts and His call can never be withdrawn."** Yet, the context of that verse makes it clear that many had "*forfeited mercy*" by rejecting Christ. There's more than one passage that seems to clearly confirm that one can do that. The Hebrew writer says 10:26-29: **"If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?"**

I know God's Word does not contradict itself. However, our interpretations and preconceived ideas very well might cover the eyes of our heart like spiritual cataracts, clouding the clear teaching of Jesus.

Allow me another personal parable, if you will. I am Stanley Harold Doyle's son. Nothing I could ever do could change that. Yet, my relationship at times with my father was strained by my rebellion. I know he never stopped loving me, but I did not experience the closeness or feel the love when I was in time-out or had been grounded. Likewise, my fellowship with God can be hampered when I purposely do things that hurt Him or His children. This is precisely what John the Apostle is talking about in 1 John 1:5-10. **"If we claim to have fellowship with Him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make Him out to be a liar and His word has no place in our lives."**

If we ignore our bitterness toward another person, harboring malice or hatred in our hearts, and demanding vengeance, our fellowship with God will be interrupted. This is especially true if we insist on our right to do so. Yet, if we confess our failure, He will forgive us and equip us to do what He's calling us to do. And what is He calling us to do? Forgive from our hearts. But, we might argue: *"I don't want to. I'm too hurt or too angry."*

His response? ***"You hurt me, too."*** / *"Ok, but, even if I wanted to, I can't."* Now, we're getting somewhere. At least we're not *"deceiving ourselves."* Be honest about our inability and trust in His ability. Romans 5:5 says that such trust will not disappoint us because, ***"God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."*** When we admit that we can't do what He wants, but ask Him to help us to do it, the floodgates to receive forgiveness are not only thrown wide open, but the tide overflows in forgiveness of others. And ***the power of forgiveness*** to free us from our own bondage – but to liberate others from theirs is incredible!

One of the things that can hinder this is buying into the lie that we can never forgive what we cannot forget. Nowhere does the Bible teach that. Though we are told that *"love keeps no record of wrongs,"* that means that we don't hold a grudge or keep a tally of an account that still needs to be paid. The pain of some things is so intense and the wounds go so deep that we will never be able to forget them, but by God's grace we can forgive them.

Another issue for us might be thinking that forgiving someone means that we must then have a close relationship with them, as if nothing ever happened. Yet, even God requires true repentance before intimacy is restored. When we have suffered betrayal or abuse, it is not only natural, but it is also wise to be wary. We may need to distance ourselves from repeat offenders for a time, giving them the opportunity to regain our trust. It should however be our desire that the relationship might be completely restored someday if God leads us to that - but again, that will depend largely upon their willingness to repent.

The truth is it's not possible to live in peace with all people. We cannot fix every broken relationship and live in harmony with everyone in the world. But, if we wish to maintain fellowship with God, we must seek His forgiveness – and His help to forgive those who have hurt us and our loved ones. And the good news is that Jesus promises in ***Mathew.7:7*** ***"If we ask, we will receive."*** Context is about asking for selfish things, but for kingdom attributes and power, So as Paul urged the Ephesian church, ***"Forgive each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."*** (4:32-5:2)