

MERCY—OR MEANNESS?

Presented by

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For the past several months in our Sunday morning Bible class, we have been studying Christ's parables. The first thing we learned was the definition of a biblical parable—"an important story with a hidden message." Then we learned that Jesus used more than thirty parables during His earthly ministry to teach people important spiritual truths. We also learned that ten of Christ's parables occur only in the gospel of Matthew, two of them occur only in the gospel of Mark, fourteen occur only in the gospel of Luke, and three occur only in the gospel of John. But the most important things we learned from the parables were the moral and spiritual lessons that Jesus gently tucked away in the stories He told the people of His generation.

For example, one of the parables found only in Matthew's gospel is what we usually refer to as "the parable of the unforgiving servant," which is recorded in Matthew 18:21-35. In this parable, Jesus recounted a story about a man who had received **mercy**, but who in turn had extended to someone else only **meanness**. As Jesus explained, there was a servant who owed his master a **colossal** sum of money—**10,000 talents** to be exact. Perhaps it will help you understand the enormity of this debt when I explain to you that **1 talent** was the equivalent of **15 years' worth of wages** for the average laborer during Christ's day. In other words, this servant owed his master so much money that if he had to work to pay it off, he would have had to work the equivalent of 150,000 years!

The time eventually came when the master demanded repayment of the debt. But the servant was unable to pay his master what he owed him. Matthew 18:25 tells us that as a result of the servant's inability to repay his debt, "the master commanded that the servant be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made." Verse 26, however, says that "the servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.'" Verse 27 then explains that "the master of the servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt." How amazing is **that**? The servant begged for mercy—and the master told him he did not have to pay back a single penny of his debt—which equaled **150,000 years' worth on the servant's part!**

What does it mean when we "have compassion" for another person? It means that we feel sorry for someone else and want to help that person. The master felt sorry for his servant, and wanted to help him. So, he told the servant that he would never have to repay the money he owed. In other words, the master forgave his servant of the debt.

However, as Jesus went on to explain in His parable, shortly after that happened the servant who had been forgiven of his massive debt was talking to one of his fellow servants. This second servant owed the first servant 100 denarii—which amounted to just **one day's wages** for a laborer. But he could not repay

even that small debt. What do you think the first servant would have done in this instance? After all, his master had just freed him from a massive debt that he **never** could have repaid. So, you might think that the first servant would do the same thing for his fellow servant. But he didn't! Instead, he became angry and had his fellow servant thrown into prison—just for owing him **one day's wages**.

But the parable does not end there. Matthew 18:31 tells us that when the second servant's fellow servants saw what had happened, they went to their master and told him about it. According to Matthew 18:32-34, here is what happened next.

“Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?’ And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him.”

What point was Jesus teaching in this parable? The first servant sought mercy—and received it from his master. But when a fellow servant wanted mercy from that first servant, all he got was meanness. By telling this parable, Jesus was trying to get us to ask ourselves, “Is that the right way to treat others?” The correct answer, of course, is that, no, it is not. As Jesus went on to say in Matthew 18:35, “So shall My heavenly Father do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.” Jesus was teaching us that God loves us and has compassion on us—and that we should treat others exactly the same as God treats us.

If we do not have mercy on others, then God will not have mercy on us. Earlier, in Matthew 6:14-15 during His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had said, “If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do **not** forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” None of us can make it to heaven without God granting us mercy and forgiveness. But if we expect God to extend mercy and forgiveness to **us**, we must be willing to extend mercy to **others** who sin against us and then ask for our forgiveness. In fact, the salvation of our souls depends on us doing exactly that! Now perhaps you can see why we have spent so many weeks learning about Christ's parables. We wanted to learn “the heavenly messages” contained within “the earthly stories” that Christ taught. I think it's safe to say that we now know **what** Christ was trying to teach in each one of His parables—and **why** He was teaching it. And when you stop to think about it, aren't those the two things that Christ wanted us to learn in the first place?