

The unmerciful servant is an extreme case of ingratitude, arrogance and mercilessness. The king refers to him as a “worthless wretch!”<sup>1</sup> He becomes angry and hands this servant over to the torturers until he would pay back all that he owed. According to the parable, however, the servant had no way of paying his master back. This would mean that the unmerciful servant would remain forever in the hands of the torturers.

All of this may seem rather shocking, that the master is going too far with his punishment. It may seem, to some, to be extreme, to be excessively cruel to treat the wicked servant in this way. Perhaps we are of this opinion because, deep down, we recognize ourselves in this servant. We may have reason to be quite uneasy about the whole matter, particularly, when Jesus says, “My heavenly Father will treat

you in exactly the same way unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart.” Regardless of how we might feel about this parable or how we might wish it was a different sort of story, we know that it is true because it comes from the lips of our Divine Savior Himself.

According to our Lord, the reign of God is like a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. This particular servant owned such a vast sum that he could not repay the debt. So, he pleaded for more time to repay it, so as not to be sold, along with his family and property. His master, however, being exceedingly generous and of great mercy takes pity on the man. He does not give him more time to repay the debt, but instead, forgives the debt entirely. He not only gave the servant far more than what He asked, but the debt that the master forgave was unimaginably massive. The

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<sup>1</sup> An equally good translation would be, a wicked or evil servant.

Greek text says that the servant owed, *μυρίων ταλάντων*, that is, a myriad of talents. As a number, a myriad is 10,000. A single talent in NT times is a unit of measure that is equal to about 80 pounds. Depending on the metal, even just a few talents would make one enormously wealthy.<sup>2</sup> At 80 pounds per talent, ten thousand talents would be as much as 800,000 pounds. Some estimate that a single talent was equal to 15 years of a laborer's salary. If that is correct, it would take someone like this servant 150,000 years to pay off the debt. It is impossible, of course, to determine exactly how much such a servant would have owned, but that is beside the point. The servant's debt toward his master is so vast, that it might as well be infinite.

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<sup>2</sup> James Swanson and Orville Nave, *New Nave's Topical Bible* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1994).

Now, it is impossible to imagine, even if this is a parable, how any servant could ever have incurred such a fantastic debt. What, then, in this story, does this debt represent?

The king in the parable is the Lord. The servant is anyone of us. The massive debt is the debt of justice we owe for our sins. This debt is without limit. Making up for our sins, then, is utterly impossible. We sinners have no defense, and no means of saving ourselves. If we would understand *anything* about the greatness of the Lord's mercy towards us, we must understand the significance of sin. This will also explain why the unmerciful servant is such an evil and worthless wretch for having condemned his fellow servant.

Why is the debt of our sin so immense? It has to do with the one whom we have sinned against. First and foremost, sin is an offence against God.

In Psalm 51, we read:

Against you, you alone, have I sinned,  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you are justified in your sentence  
and blameless when you pass judgment (Ps (51:4)

Sin is an offence against God, because God is the source and author of all that is good. In fact, God is not simply someone who is good or does good, but He is goodness itself, just as the Scripture teaches that God is love. And this goodness, which is God Himself, is infinite, just as his existence or His being is infinite. God is not simply someone who exists, but He is existence itself, and thus, the source of all that is.

These things are far beyond our minds to comprehend, but it is all, nevertheless, true. When we sin, it is not simply against someone who is good, but against infinite goodness

Himself. As such, the offence is infinite, meaning, we have an infinite debt of justice that we owe to the Lord.

Perhaps an analogy will help to make this more understandable. Suppose you are peasant, the very lowest rank, in a very great kingdom. In this kingdom there are fellow peasants, farmers, craftsmen, barons, magistrates, mayors, knights, various nobles and the members of the king's court. In the court, there is queen mother (the mother of the reigning monarch), princes and princesses, the queen, and then finally the king himself. Now, suppose that you sin against a fellow peasant by lying and stealing from him. This would be wrong, of course, and the fellow peasant would rightly demand your punishment and payment of the debt of justice that you owe him. But suppose you did the same thing to a baron, a magistrate (judge), the mayor, a knight or some nobleman. Can we begin to see that because of their person

and rank, that the offence would be greater? And what if you were to commit the same offence against the queen mother, a prince or princess, or even the queen? Would you not be in far more trouble? Finally, what if your offence is against the king himself?

Sin is always an offence, an attack, on goodness. God is not only the source of all that is good, but He is infinite goodness Himself. Who will be able to pay the debt of justice for such an offence? There is only One. It is Jesus Christ, who is God Himself. God, in and through our human nature, as one of us, bares the justice we deserve for our sins.

The unmerciful servant was forgiven an immeasurable debt. Although he was shown infinite mercy, he showed no mercy to his fellow servant. There is, indeed, no greater ingratitude than this, and, perhaps, no greater sin. Can we begin to understand now, why the master refers to him as a

“worthless wretch!”? He was granted infinite mercy over his debt to the *king*, but granted no mercy, to a simple servant like himself, over a pittance of debt.

All of us must take this parable to heart. Failing to do so is at our own peril. Are we truly grateful of the Lord’s mercy toward us? If we are, then, we had better forgive those who have sinned against us. No matter what anyone has done to us, no matter what anyone owes us in terms of justice, it is nothing compared to what we owe the Lord. So, let us not be ungrateful for what the Lord has done for us, but forgive one another from our heart. This not a feeling; it is not that we must like anyone or allow ourselves to be treated like a doormat. It is, instead, a choice, a decision of our mind and will to forgive as we have been forgiven.

When I think of this parable, I say to the Lord, “My Lord, for anyone that I might harbor unforgiveness, no matter

what anyone has done to me, I forgive them, I forgive them. I wish them no evil, but only good.” I think that this is a good prayer that we should say often, but particularly, when someone comes to mind who has sinned against us and hurt us. Consider the example of St. Maria Goretti. At the age of twelve, she was stabbed 14 times because she refused the sexual advances of Alessandro Serenellis. As she lay dying in the hospital, in tremendous pain, she forgave Alessandro and prayed that he would one day be with her in heaven.

Ask the Lord for the grace to truly forgive. Ask Him to heal you of the pain and hurt. But if such pain and hurt remains, you can still forgive. Remember how our Lord hung on the cross, in agony, yet forgave His tortures. Whatever the pain and suffering you might experience, because of those who have sinned against you, unite it to our Lord on the cross. His suffering was for your sins, He bore the debt justice that

you deserved, but could not repay. Unite your pain and suffering, then, to Jesus on the cross. He understands. He truly understands. Let us all, then, be filled with gratitude, and forgive one another, from the heart as the Lord has forgiven us.