

Unexpected Mercies: Four Shocking Parables of God's Realm
Part 3: Parable of the Unforgiving Servant
Pass-A-Grille Community Church (UCC)
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Scripture: Matthew 18: 21-35

I. Johnny Was Right, Dead Right

My father once shared a piece of advice that, though it frustrated me at the time, has lingered in my thoughts ever since. It was during a drive shortly after I had received my learner's permit. As we approached a bustling intersection, the traffic light shifted from green to yellow.

Instinctively, I pressed down on the accelerator, and we glided through just as the light flickered to red. My dad directed me to a side road to pull over. "You shouldn't have sped up back there; you ought to have stopped," he said. "But the light was still yellow when we entered the intersection!" I argued. "That's perfectly legal."

Then came my father's wisdom, as vexing as it was profound. "Eric," he said, "always remember: **Johnny was right—dead right. But now he's as dead as he was right.**"

I must admit that my tendency to accelerate at yellow lights didn't cease immediately, yet I understood that my father had imparted a valuable lesson that extended well beyond the rules of the road.

Jesus imparts similar wisdom in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant in Matthew 18. His teaching can be just as exasperating, yet it reveals a critical truth about the nature of God and the rhythm of life.

A servant owes his king an enormous sum: 10,000 talents. In modern terms, this translates to just shy of a staggering \$7 billion!¹ The king, refusing to extend his servant's debt limit any further, demands immediate repayment. Unable to pay, the servant faces the sale of his family and possessions. However, upon making an emotional plea for more time, the king mercifully forgives the entire debt. Can you imagine being forgiven a \$7 billion debt? I'd be over the moon just to have my mortgage forgiven!

This parable is not just a story about financial debts, of course. It's a metaphor for divine forgiveness of human sin. Jesus uses this narrative to show God's amazing grace and boundless mercy. This is something Jesus not only taught, but embodied – especially on the Cross. There, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Surely, Jesus didn't pray this prayer without believing with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength that God's love for humanity runs so deep that God would forgive even his own crucifiers.

¹ One talent = 6,000 denarii. One denarii = 1 day's wages for an average day laborer. 10,000 talents = 6,000 x 10,000 day's wages (over 165,000 years, working 6 days/week). Based on the minimum wage in Florida of \$12/hr, this amounts to \$5.76 billion. However, based on a "living wage" of \$15/hr, the amount equals \$6.72 billion.

Many Christians take this radical cleansing of sin to heart, believing that if we accept Jesus' prayer as one he makes not just for his crucifiers, but for us, then we receive the same forgiveness they did.

To be clear, I do not share the popular belief that God needed to kill Jesus in order for his blood to wash us clean of our sin. God didn't kill Jesus. We did. Yet, I believe Jesus' response to our shedding of his blood reveals the very heart of God's heart. If God could forgive even those who crucified God's chosen Messiah, then who among us cannot be washed clean of our own mistakes, misdeeds, and utter failures? Talk about truly amazing Grace!

Ironically, many followers of Jesus are more than happy to receive God's magnanimous Grace yet don't seem particularly eager to extend this same Grace to others. In fact, both conservative Christians and liberal ones are often at the front of the line casting stones upon those they deem to be sinners. The main difference between liberals and conservatives is who they're targeting.

Receiving forgiveness without giving it is a situation Jesus seemed to anticipate in his Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. The parable takes a sharp, dark turn when the servant who has been forgiven a lifetime of debt encounters another who owes him the modern equivalent of \$11,000. Despite his own experience with mercy, the servant shows none to his debtor, sending him to prison for his failure to pay.

I can hear my father offering the same advice to the Unforgiving Servant as he did to his lead-footed son years ago. This servant was perfectly right to demand that his debt be paid. He was dead right. Yet, when he exercises this right, the Unforgiving Servant ends up as spiritually dead as he was right.

The king rebukes this unforgiving servant for not extending the same mercy he received and condemns him to torture until his debt was repaid. Jesus concludes his parable with a solemn warning that God will treat us similarly if we don't forgive others sincerely.

Yikes! Is it any wonder that when Peter asks Jesus how many times we should forgive someone who sins against us and thinks he's being generous by proposing "as many as seven times," that Jesus radically adjusts his math? "I tell you," Jesus counters, "not seven times, but seventy-seven times." (Some manuscripts read "seventy times seven"!) It's like he's saying, "You want to make absolutely sure you don't have even the slightest chance of becoming the Unforgiving Servant!"

Now, if you should resemble the Unforgiving Servant, I don't believe God will punish you for your failure to forgive. Rather, you will punish yourself. This self-inflicted torment will stem from never truly forgiving yourself for wrongs that God has forgiven. If you can't bring yourself to extend forgiveness for the comparatively minor transgressions others have committed against you, it signifies that God's grace has yet to transform you. You have not allowed it to penetrate your heart. God may have let go of your sins, but you have not. Likely, you will continue to beat yourself up internally over past mistakes; you'll continue believing the tapes inside your head that tell you what a bad person you are, what a disappointment you are, and how you do not deserve anything good to happen to you.

With Jesus, the governing principle seems to be this: **God is happy to give you as much Grace as you could ever need in this life. Yet you can only keep the Grace that you can give away.**

Is not this very principle revealed in the Lord's Prayer? Each week we pray, "Forgive us our debts *as we forgive our debtors.*" If you should overlook the relationship between giving and receiving forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus follows it in Matthew's Gospel by adding, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, *neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*" (Matt 6:14-15)

Before moving on, I invite you to take a moment to consider your own relationships – relationships with family, friends, work colleagues, and others – even church members. If you accept Jesus' prayer for forgiveness on the Cross as a prayer he makes not just for his crucifiers, but for you, then is there anyone you should be cutting some slack right now?

II. Jesus was More Than Right

If you made an honest assessment of your relationships, chances are you turned up some people you really should be offering more grace to right now. You may have been right about the wrongs they've committed against you – dead right. But continuing to hold their wrongs against them has both deadened the relationship between you, and deadened something within you.

Of course, if you determine to "forgive and forget" the wrongs of someone who has no intention of changing their ways, this can create a lot more harm than good. It is important to bear in mind that, according to Jesus, one must forgive another person only if the wrongdoer *repents*. (Luke 17:3-4). They must recognize the harm they've done and seek to change. Otherwise, "forgiving and forgetting" simply enables bad behavior. Your only obligation to such people is to make your complaint known to them so that they at least are aware of what they have done and have the opportunity to change and be forgiven.

Still, Jesus' parable of the Unforgiving Servant should make it clear that we should jump on any opportunity we have to forgive someone, if at all possible, in whatever way possible. It is in our best interest to forgive anyone we possibly can.

I've learned this lesson through experience. One experience, in particular, was both excruciatingly hard yet brilliantly healing. I want to share my experience, both for the sake of example, and so you know that I endeavor to actually practice what I preach.

In 2020, I left Countryside Community Church in Omaha, Nebraska, after 13 years as its Senior Minister, and embarked on what I knew would be the most challenging pastorate of my ministry, in Portland, Oregon. The Pacific Northwest is part of the "Unchurched Belt," a region where "no religion" is the most commonly selected option on religious surveys. The church I joined, founded in 1871, is one of the oldest in Portland, situated in the heart of the city. This location meant it was at the epicenter of all the chaos you saw broadcasted on television during the pandemic in 2020. Although the sanctuary seats 800, the membership had dwindled to 200, with an average age of about 75. Furthermore, the church had seen the abrupt departures of the last two settled ministers as well as an interim minister amid conflict.

Despite these challenges, I was not deterred. The three congregations I had previously served were all experiencing distress when I began, yet I had left each strengthened and actively involved in impactful ministries. I had a perfect track record! My confidence was less in my abilities and more in the Holy Spirit's capacity to enact change through those who are open to the Spirit's help and guidance. I was open, and I felt the Spirit was directing me to this church. So, with a sense of divine calling, I left Omaha for Portland.

Upon my arrival, I discovered that the congregation, while housing some truly extraordinary individuals, was rather well known among my clergy colleagues for an abusive culture that had alienated members, staff, and clergy alike. Ironically, this was the most proudly "progressive" congregation I had ever served. Yet, as a friend and UCC pastor has often remarked, "It is amazing how much pride, prejudice, self-righteousness, and malice can be crammed into an open mind."

That first year, despite the culture and the pandemic, I made significant headway. I was hopeful that the influx of revitalizing energy could cleanse the toxicity from the congregation. However, this optimism was shattered when a trusted retired minister in the congregation misinterpreted a confidential conversation and mistakenly believed I was planning to leave. I had not the slightest intention of leaving. Yet, in an abusive culture, subjective views become "truth," and fear supplants faith, and vengeance is counted as virtue. This minister aimed to ruin my ministry and cause me as much personal distress as he could possibly inflict.

I won't revisit the trauma inflicted by this individual or the compounded damage from the church leadership's mishandling of the situation. Suffice it to say that while the abuse was not sexual, emotionally I felt like I had been raped. Subsequently, I experienced a breakdown that resulted in a medical leave of absence. When the leadership chose silence over action, I resigned, knowing that I would never be safe again in that church.

The aftermath required intense self-reflection and healing, involving a whole lot of prayer and meditation, walks in nature, therapeutic soaks in mineral springs, and counseling. Yet, despite my best efforts, the ordeal left me with an overwhelming sense of rage and despair. I questioned God's presence and purpose in guiding me from a beloved church in Omaha to a destructive situation in Portland. My experience cast doubt on my Christian identity and ministerial future.

What finally shifted my perspective and brought me back to my Christian faith was an epiphany. One day I was driving back home from a hike in the Columbia River Gorge, my head still swirling with despair and rage. Yet into the mix drifted an image of Jesus on the Cross praying, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:24) As I reflected on this image, I realized that, when I accepted Jesus's prayer as one made for me, not merely for others, I become like the servant who owed the king \$7 billion and had his debts wiped clean.

Ever since I accepted God's amazing Grace, I have felt an astonishing freedom in my relationship with God, and a deep assurance that God loves me far more than I love myself. I've experienced a quiet confidence that believes in me more than I believe in me, and that God continues to prefer being in relationship with me over holding my sins against me.

Naturally, as my righteous Creator, God would be perfectly right to hold my faults and shortcomings against me – dead right. But if God were to exercise this right, our relationship would be as dead as God was right. So would God’s relationship with any of God’s children. So, like a Loving Parent, God chooses relationship over perfection, loving correction over punishment, restorative justice over retributive justice.

As I recalled all this on my car ride home, an uncomfortable question welled up within me that went something like this:

"Eric, why are you retaining the offenses of this minister who abused you for but a moment in your life, when I have let go of all your transgressions for your entire life?"

Seeing where this question was leading, I pushed back: “But wait! You can’t make me out to be the Unforgiving Servant here. The guy who owed him money was aware of his debt and begged for mercy. This abusive minister has never acknowledged the wrong he did and doubtless would do it again if he were able. Isn’t it true that there can be no forgiveness without repentance?”

“It’s not that you have to forgive, Eric,” came the internal voice. *“It’s just that you can forgive. You have left the church, so this man can’t hurt you anymore. Yet the pain is ever with you. Can you really afford not to forgive?”*

It was then that I realized that, through God’s love and forgiveness shown most fully by Christ on the Cross, I had been made a spiritually wealthy person. Wealthy enough that whatever spiritual debt this abusive minister owed me was but a trifle. Hardly more than a rounding error! Clinging to his debt was killing me. Yet I was wealthy enough to simply write it off and move on.

I chose to let go. I completely released this man of any debt I could hold against him. Releasing this man’s debt marked the beginning of genuine healing. From that day on, I grew healthier and walked more lightly upon the earth.

This connection between Jesus and forgiveness is why I am, and believe I will always be, a Christian. In my life, the only story that is grand enough to contain or comprehend God’s immeasurable love and grace – and profound enough to heal our deepest hurts – is the story of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. While I am confident that God has ways of making God’s amazing love and grace known to people of other faiths, I have no need to look beyond Christ’s story to find my own.