Chapter 5

Mercy

The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant
{Matthew 18:21-31}
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One Main Thing

What does real mercy look like?

Introduction

The parable that closes Matthew 18 is triggered by the question asked as the chapter begins. The disciples came to Jesus and asked "...who is the greatest in the kingdom?" In the typical human way of seeing community, determining our rank is often the first order of business. That's just the way we do things and see things. But in the community of Jesus, things operate differently. His is a world where the least is the greatest, the weak are strong, the first are last and the humble are rewarded. This upside down way of thinking, living, and acting are at the center of the chapter and drive the telling of this parable. In the text considered here, Jesus gives us His longest treatment of this often asked

and still relevant topic, and His teaching should lead us to understand and view this issue in a way that is counter to human nature.

Setting

The organization of the story lends itself to the structure of a typical Jewish parable: arrangement by threes. There are three main participants: a king, a servant, and a fellow servant. There are also three scenes with three subsections or speakers in each:

King's Accounting
    Master-Servant-Master
Servant's Accounting
    Servant-Fellow Servant-Servant
King's Response
    Master-Servant-Servant

This structure attracts a reader's attention and engages imagination but would have also given an initial false sense of a Jewish setting. The Jewish audience on the day of this teaching would have been expecting the flow of the narrative to have the first two participants doing things wrong and the third individual, a good Jew, to make all things right by their actions. However, Jesus, ever the master teacher, throws them a curve ball from the onset.

The large sum of money presents problems for the setting; is this purely an imaginary event? That is entirely possible. Many would say the large sum of money is amplified to make a point and in no way corresponds to reality. The talent (the largest monetary denomination) and the denarius (the smallest) lent themselves to a natural contrast of extremes. Ten thousand, in the first century Jewish world, was the highest figure in which arithmetic was calculated.[1]

However, there are other clues in the text that would have allowed those listening that day to see an alternate understanding. The large sum of money could denote a royal situation. Certainly the amount involved would merit someone other than a common slave, maybe a high official or representative of the king. But under what circumstances would such an amount be due?

A king would normally contract out tax collections on farm lands under their control at an auction to the highest bidder. The arrangement could be very lucrative because the contractor, after adding on his percentage, could then subcontract the

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[1] Donald Senior, "Matthew 18:21–35," *Interpretation* 41 (1987): 403–7, at 405.

actual collection to others. However, along with the potential windfall also came risk. What if the there is a drought? What if pestilence destroys the crops? In that outcome collections would be short; possibly woefully short.

Records indicate that Herod's total collection was only 900 talents.[2] However, Josephus tells of Joseph son of Tobias, a tax-farmer, who offers to collect taxes totaling 16,000 talents for the Egyptian King Ptolemy (Antiquities 12.175–76).[3] This leads to the probable conclusion that if the scenario was a tax farming situation the King would be Gentile not Jewish.[4] The servant begs for patience and says he will repay the entire huge amount. If he is understood as a collector of tax farming, the debt could be rolled to the next year's harvest, and the scenario seems plausible. The threat to throw him into prison was a normal punishment for failure to live up to a contract.

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[2] Bernard Brandon Scott, "The King's Accounting: Matthew 18:23–34," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (1985): 429–42, 432.

[3] J. Duncan M. Derrett, *Law in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1970), 36n3.

[4] Martinus C. de Boer, "Ten Thousand Talents: Matthew's Interpretation and Redaction of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:23–35)," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988): 214–32, at 217.

In addition, there are other elements of the teaching that indicate non-Jewish origin. The KJV renders v. 26, "he fell on his knees and worshipped him." No Jew would ever worship another person. However, Hellenistic kings were often thought to be divine. Furthermore, Jewish law forbade the sale of wife and children to settle a husband's debt, though that form of punishment was not unusual for Gentiles.[5] Lastly, choking someone was socially unacceptable among Jews (cf. 18:28).

All of this presents the possibility that the setting could have been based in actual events with Gentile participants. This conclusion is made even more believable as Jesus uses the preconceived prejudices by the Jews against Gentiles to draw the audience into the story and keep them engaged to see what happens next. The text deliberately creates this tension which keeps the reader from knowing which way things will go.

Interpretation

Typical of Matthew's style, this parable is a thinly veiled allegory. Also in line with several of Matthew's parables the end result is judgment.

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[5] Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 2d ed. (New York: Scribner's, 1972), 211.

Reconciliation is another major theme. This parable is one of several instances in Matthew's gospel where an urgent appeal for reconciliation is found.

In the end this parable is about community: a word portrait of ideal community and what mercy really looks like, a place where concern for the alienated and marginalized dominate the narrative and reconciliation has no limits. The God revealed by Jesus here is a God of unimaginable compassion.

Forgiveness is a central consideration in this story, as well. Forgiveness here is not a matter of dealing with a personal insult or even verbal offense, as Peter surmises (18:21), but the matter at hand is financial: there is a debt that is owed. Clearly that debt is ours of our own making to God because of our sin.

The clear point of the parable is the contrast between the behavior of the King and the servant in all these areas.

Application

The appeal of Christ is for us as readers today to be challenged about our own behavior.

Forgiveness is urgent because we are a forgiven people. What the servant first experienced from the King, unconditional compassion, is the reality out of which he was expected to act, and the same is true for us. To love an enemy or show mercy in places and situations where it is least expected we will demonstrate the ultimate form of forgiveness and that in turn makes us a child of the God whose love is unexpected and unlimited.

Throughout the gospels, especially Matthew, we see mercy with warnings of judgment. The need for responsible action as the sign of authentic faith is a reoccurring theme and it is connected to our accounting before God in the end. The Christian life is not a matter of just good intentions, ritualistic performances, or wishful thinking; faith must be translated into just and compassionate acts. The experience of God's grace brings with it a responsibility to act graciously. Justice is not an option but an urgent demand flowing from the reality of the gospel.

The beauty of Jesus' teaching is that He sets up the Jewish audience (but also us today). They are thinking how cruel the Gentiles are in their affairs. But then there is the master's pity; how unexpected. All this is woven together to bring the audience into the narrative and have them invest

emotionally in the outcome just as we must invest in others and be emotionally engaged about their eternal outcome.

Conclusion

This parable presents profound and living theology. A fundamental message of this parable is that the Christian must act on a basis of God's incalculable mercy to us. We must give out what we have been given. Real mercy is demonstrated, lived out, and shown. If someone were asked what real mercy looked like, would they think of you?

Discussion

1. How do you define mercy?

2. What words would you use to describe the opposite of mercy?

3. Why do you think the servant asked the King for more time and did not ask for the debt to be canceled?

4. What stereotypes do we struggle with today? Are religious and moral superiority two of those?

5. The servant was within his legal rights to ask for the debt from the fellow servant. Discuss rights and demands for justice in human terms versus God's terms.

6. How is the act of mercy, and not the amount of the debt, the element that is unexpected?

7. Discuss the master's act of mercy not representing simply a temporary and unrepeatable "exception" to the rule but the new rule.

8. What would be the results if your congregation lived by Jesus' teachings on mercy?

9. Why do you think emotions are so closely connected to mercy?

10. Describe a time someone has shown mercy to you.