

Forgiveness – it’s a pretty simple, basic concept, right? We tell even our smallest children that they need to forgive, and we expect them to do this. Yet if forgiveness is so simple, why do we struggle to do it? Why do we ask questions like Peter: “How many times must I forgive?”

Often, our ideas of what forgiveness is, and what’s going on in it, tend to get warped by sin. Thus, Jesus gives us this parable. In it, Jesus shows that behind forgiveness there are two driving forces: justice, and mercy.

Justice is when things are truly right and fair, in conformity to God’s Law and standard. Mercy is when someone is spared from a punishment that they deserve. Forgiveness, then, is what happens when justice and mercy collide. Understanding these elements helps us to rightly understand forgiveness, and by better understanding, we are better able to forgive.

When God forgives, His justice is met by His mercy. Both are present in every act of forgiveness. God’s justice requires that the debt we owe to Him from our transgressions of His holy Law be paid.

There’s a reason why this whole parable revolves around the idea of debt. Debt must be paid; you can’t simply sweep it under the rug or just write it off. If you do “cancel” debt, what you actually do is force the person to whom the debt is owed to shoulder it rather than the person who actually owes the debt.

This king in the parable can’t just snap his fingers and conjure up ten thousand talents. Either this money is paid back to him, or he takes the loss personally. The same goes for our sins.

When we sin, it’s against God. There is a cost, a debt, that comes from our breaking the Law. It makes a rift between us and God, our sins creating a deficit that drops us below God’s holiness and keeps us from His presence. And just like a financial debt, this spiritual debt can’t just be ignored or swept under the rug. No, according to justice, sins do and must have consequences.

God doesn’t just snap His fingers and make sins disappear. It’s not a matter of power, as though God doesn’t have the power to do so, but rather a matter of justice. If God just let sins go, then He wouldn’t actually be just. And if God isn’t just, then the world becomes a terrifying place, as you then can’t actually count on God for anything, or trust Him at all. No, God is just, and so sin’s debt must be paid.

Yet as God is just, He is also merciful. This is seen in the actions of the king. The slave, having an insanely large debt, comes to the king begging for more time, promising that he’ll pay everything.

This is an impossible promise, as ten thousand talents works out to be around sixty million days’ wages. He literally cannot live long enough to pay it back, even if he worked nonstop until the day of his death.

What’s more, why should the king think that this servant will actually work towards paying off the debt? You don’t get hundreds of millions of dollars in debt by accident. No, this slave has made a

whole lot of very bad decisions in the past. If he's given more time, he may very well just skim a bit more cash and then skip town. There's no reason for the king to grant this slave's request.

And so he doesn't. But he also doesn't sell off the man and his family and his possessions, even though that would be within his rights as the slave's master.

No, he looks at this slave of his, who has been incredibly stupid and even evil, who is reduced to blubbering nonsensical promises at his feet, and he has compassion. The king feels a sorrow, a love, inside himself for this poor slave. The slave has brought all this on himself, but even so, the king still cares deeply for him.

And so, in mercy, he cancels the slave's debt. With a word of love, the master removes the crushing burden from the slave's shoulders, giving him back his family, his possessions, his life. Because of the master's mercy, the slave is forgiven, reconciled to his loving king.

But the king's mercy hasn't been free. Again, those ten thousand talents are still in the red. The king hasn't made them go away, but rather has transferred the debt to himself. And lest we think that this is no big deal, that amount is enormous, even for a king.

The king's mercy has cost him dearly. His mercy has led him to satisfy the justice, to pay the debt himself, to suffer great loss in place of another.

This mercy of the king points us to the mercy of God Himself. You and I sin against God every day in our thoughts, words, and deeds. We fail to do what we know we should. We fail to keep from doing the things we know we shouldn't. We even sin without knowing it, because our corruption runs so deep that we break God's law and aren't even aware of it.

And like the slave, we can't do a thing to pay this debt back ourselves. Even if you lived a perfect life from this point forward, did every good deed you had the opportunity to do, you'd only be doing what the Law requires.

You can't generate extra "good" to cancel out the bad, because you can't do better than perfection, and perfection is what God's Law requires. Your situation is impossible.

This is where God's mercy comes in. He knows your sins, every one of them, because they've been committed against Him. And He knows you can't satisfy the just requirements of you sins' debt. So in mercy, He cancels your debt.

But, like the king in the parable, He does this by taking on the burden Himself. That's what happened at the cross. The eternal Son of God took on flesh, was born of the Virgin Mary, and died on Golgotha to make payment for each and every one of your sins, and my sins, and the sins of every single person who has ever lived or will live. He endured the punishment that you and I deserve, not only the bodily suffering and death, but the unimaginable torments of hell on His soul as His Father turned away from Him.

God's justice has been satisfied by His own merciful sacrifice. Because of this great mercy, God enduring His own wrath in our place, we are like that slave, completely reconciled to our King, at peace with God through faith in Christ. This justice being answered by mercy, that is forgiveness.

Our lives as Christians are grounded in this forgiveness, this satisfying of justice by mercy. It defines our eternal reality, gives us eternal life. And so if it grounds our lives in eternity, it must also define our lives here and now, for justice and mercy never stop applying.

The world we live in is a fallen world. Every single person is a sinner. Some redeemed by Christ, some still in darkness, but all daily sinning against God and one another. And so, it will necessarily happen that other people will sin against you. People will not speak and act with perfect justice to you, but will cause you grief and harm. Sometimes this will even be quite painful or severe.

The first slave in the parable is owed one hundred denarii by another slave. That's a hundred day's wages – nothing to sneeze at, especially as a slave who may not make a whole lot of money. Recognizing the reality of our sins against one another, and the trouble they cause, is necessary.

We're often tempted to try to wave them off, saying things like, "Don't worry about it," or "It's no big deal." Why is it that such phrases come so much easier than "I forgive you"? Well, by attempting to ignore sins, we're trying to skirt around justice. It may seem like the "nice" thing to do, and we say such things with good intentions, but what this actually does is denies the reality of sin, and often it can lead to building resentment, as the sins aren't ever actually dealt with. Justice remains, even if we try to deny it.

So if justice remains, what are we to do? Are we free to try to make sure the score is even, to get our pound of flesh from those who wrong us?

That's the attitude of the first slave, who upon being released by the king goes out and finds another slave who owes him and starts throttling him while yelling, "Pay what you owe!" When this fellow slave falls down and starts pleading with him, those pleas fall on deaf ears. The first slave has his fellow slave thrown in debtors prison until he gets paid, because he wants justice.

We are constantly tempted to be like this, to get even with others, to make sure we get what's coming to us. We may not go up and start choking people, but we make it very clear that they have wronged us, perhaps by talking about them behind their back, spreading gossip and rumors concerning them, doing little passive-aggressive things to make their lives just a bit more miserable.

And all the while, we assume the stance of righteousness, the moral high ground, because after all, they started it. We just want what's fair. We simply want justice.

Yet this is not justice, as Jesus shows in the parable. The fellow slaves who watch the one slave mistreat the other aren't scandalized and go tell the king because they're a bunch of tattle-tales. No, they're greatly distressed because what this slave has done is against both the justice and the mercy of the king.

As the king points out to the wicked slave, "Should not you have had mercy on your fellow slave as I had mercy on you?" The slave had been shown mercy; the just thing would have been for him to show mercy in return.

And after all, the debt the king had taken off the first slave was much, much greater than the debt owed by the second slave to the first. Finally, the slave is only out walking around at all because

of the mercy of the king. By justice alone, he shouldn't even have the opportunity to go around collecting debts from others.

When we think that we should be allowed to "get even" with others and withhold forgiveness from them, we need to call this slave to mind.

Like the slave, we too have been shown incredible mercy by our heavenly King, and so the just thing is to show mercy to others. Also, the wrongs that others might have done against us is nothing compared to the lifetime of sin which we have done against God.

Remember too that all sins are ultimately against God, and if He has granted forgiveness for the sake of Jesus, then you and I have no grounds to refuse forgiveness. And as with the slave, the only reason we're here at all is the love and mercy of God.

Plus, there's one more thing that we have, beyond the slave in this parable. We're sinners, which means that we owe debts to plenty of other people. It's not just a one-way street. We certainly want others to forgive us, and so we need to follow the Golden Rule, doing unto others what we would have them do to us.

If we don't do this, if we refuse to show mercy to others, then we're left with only justice. God is just to refuse mercy to those who refuse mercy to others.

This is what dooms the first slave. He has rejected mercy and demands that debts be paid to him. In turn, then, the king justly rescinds his mercy and demands payment. The slave is then handed over to the jailers until he pays, which will be never.

This is what happens to those who despise and reject the mercy of God and refuse that mercy to others. When people do this, reject this free gift, God in His justice must put the burden back on them.

God will condemn people to hell, not because He is mean or likes having people suffer, but because His holiness and justice demand that He punishes sin. He has purchased their freedom from sin through the blood of His Son, but if people refuse this, then He must leave them in their chains.

And just like how no one could ever pay off a ten thousand talent debt in prison, no one will ever pay off their sins in hell. The only thing that can pay for sins is the blood of Jesus, and it's rejecting this that's landed them in hell.

Thus as Christians, we are always seeking forgiveness. We constantly need to ask our Lord for forgiveness and thank Him for washing away our sins as well as His constant renewal of our hearts by His Word and Spirit. Being led by the Word and Spirit to realize the incredible mercy which God has shown to us, we then seek to share that mercy with others.

We gladly forgive, taking the burden of sins against us and giving them to God, for He is the One who atones for sin and grants true peace. We look to our King for true justice and mercy, and He will never fail to care for His servants. We forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us, for we have been forgiven.

In the name of Jesus, amen.