



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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### **PORTRAIT OF AN APOLOGY: FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS**

Scripture: Matthew 18:21-35

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#### INTRODUCTION

I'd like to talk today about something that can block, stall, even destroy relationships. It can destroy your spiritual life and growth. It's **the inability (or, unwillingness) to accept and offer FORGIVENESS.**

I think we all agree that forgiveness is a beautiful idea until we have to practice it. Yet it is God's prescription for the broken-hearted. No matter how great the offense or abuses, along the path to healing lies forgiveness.

In a parable found in **Matthew 18:21-35**—called the *Parable of the Unmerciful Servant*—Jesus puts into living color His teachings about forgiveness. The parable is filled with profound insights about spiritual & emotional healing. Jesus knew what was in us at the deepest levels. So we should expect His teachings to penetrate to the deepest level.

#### THE PARABLE

A king decides to settle accounts. He finds one servant owes him the incredible sum of 10,000 talents = millions. An impossible sum of money. An exaggeration on purpose (to make a point).

To give you some perspective, the annual tax revenue from the surrounding provinces of Judea, Idumea, Samaria, Galilee, and Perea = \$800,000 total.

The servant falls on his knees and begs for mercy—a particular kind of mercy. The word used suggests “an extension of time, a delay”. He was merely asking for more time. Well, the servant's idea of mercy is one thing; but the king has a different idea. The king forgives him all his debt and releases him.

Now God is our king. And we are to love Him, serve Him, make His will the rule of our lives. But all of us fall short. And so we owe Him big-time; the debt we owe is simply astronomical. It's a debt we could never repay in a million years, and we deserve to be cast into debtors' prison (a symbol of hell?) forever. But in His infinite mercy, God wants to cancel our debt and set us free. And that is exactly what He does when we bow before Him.

So you would think the “servant” in this Parable would have no trouble forgiving. . .or at least extending time to a fellow servant who owes him a measly 10 denarii == a few dollars (\$20). Instead he seizes him by the throat and says: “*Pay me what you owe me.*” When the co-worker can't come up with the cash, he has him thrown into debtor's prison until he can pay in full.

Then the king summons the servant and says, “Look, I forgave you all your debts and you treat your fellow servant like this? The record says He gets mad at him and throws him back in jail. “*Do not pass GO! Do not collect \$200!*” ☺

What a shocker! The implication couldn't be clearer: To the unforgiven and the unforgiving, God will be like a harsh and stern debt-collector.

When I was in COLLEGE & SEMINARY, I had a number of jobs. Over the course of 8 years:

- I sold encyclopedias door-to-door;
- I pumped gas;
- I was a night-time janitor in an elementary school;
- I was on the clean-up crew in an ice cream factory (for 2 summers);
- I worked at a Bar-B-Que joint;
- I stocked car parts for an auto parts company;
- My longest and best job was as a math instructor in a small engineering college;
- **One job I refused to take – collection agent.**

Many of us think of God as a cosmic debt-collector. . .and sin as a debt that is owed. What is owed? A consequence of some sort for sins or trespasses.

When we sin against a person, or someone sins against us, it also seems like there is a debt owed:

- Don't we say, "I feel that person *owes* me an apology."
- Don't we say a prisoner is "*paying* his debt to society"?

Jesus put this concept at the very heart of the Lord's Prayer, when he taught us to pray:

*"Forgive us our **debts** as we forgive our **debtors**."*

Now in our church we say:

*"Forgive us our **trespasses** as we forgive those who **trespass** against us."*

Which is correct? BOTH!

Actually, "*debts*" is used in Matthew's version (standard). . .and "*sins*" is used in Luke's. Two different words, but they are interchangeable ( $\approx$  synonyms) in the Aramaic language. To avoid the confusion of using a banking term such as "*debts*", the more theological-moral term "*trespasses*" was made common by the Church of England *Prayer Book*. [We know it as the *Book of Common Prayer*.]

Aren't we driven to pay the debt we've accumulated. . .OR to collect the debt we feel someone owes us? The debt we hold over someone else's head is often measured in terms of bitterness, resentment, hostility, malice, withdrawal. An unforgiving spirit exacts its own price. We pay for it with a lot of inner turmoil, interpersonal conflicts, and actual physical symptoms & ailments.

So this Parable teaches us two very difficult but interconnected truths about forgiveness. . . . .

## I. HOW HARD IT IS TO RECEIVE FORGIVENESS

So many of us are like that servant in the Parable. He misunderstood the offer, and so pled for patience and more time. How unrealistic! He could scrimp and save a whole lifetime and not even come close to paying back this debt (\$10 million).

But look what happened. The Lord in his mercy gave him far more than he asked for. . .more than he could dream about or hope for. He dismissed the entire debt—all \$10 million! He tore it up. . . canceled it. . .set the man free. No more threat of imprisonment.

The poor servant couldn't believe it. He couldn't take it in. He couldn't receive it. He couldn't enjoy it. All the "tormentors" in his mind (e.g.: guilt, striving, anxiety) kicked in, leading him to be hard on others who owed him.

You know, we talk a good line about GRACE, but it's not the way most of us live. We affirm it in our creeds and sing about it in our hymns & songs. We proclaim it as a distinctive of the Christian faith—that *we have been saved by **grace** alone through faith*. But much of it is on the head level. It hasn't (for many)

gotten to the heart level. Yet. . .

**“Grace is God’s undeserved favor”.** Do you believe it this morning? Are you living out of that reality? And. . .

**“Grace is unearned”.** It can never be repaid. . .it can only be received. I wonder, this morning, are you on the tragic treadmill of “performing / achieving / striving”? Doing all that to get rid of your guilt. . .trying to pay back the debt you rang up. If so, your salvation is more like a “*promissory note*” than a debt that’s been stamped “*paid in full*”.

**ILLUSTRATION**> I read about a young couple who were having problems in their marriage. The wife was a very warm, affectionate, loving person and very supportive of her husband. He, on the other hand, was constantly criticizing her and blaming her for things that were really not her fault. It began to dawn on him that he was destroying their marriage, and so he sought out a marriage counselor. At the initial interview, he met the trouble like a real man == he blamed it on his wife. ☺ ☺ But as he became more honest, the painful root of the matter came to light. It turned out that while he was in the armed forces in Korea, he fell into temptation and had a brief affair. He had never been able to forgive himself—or really receive God’s forgiveness (although he had sought it). So he couldn’t accept her freely offered affection and love. He felt he didn’t deserve it; his debt was too big to be paid back.

Perhaps the hardest person in all the world to forgive is yourself. It would almost be easier to forgive an enemy. Anger & resentment against yourself along with a refusal to forgive yourself is just as damaging as failure to forgive someone else. [More on that later in this series!]

## II. **HOW HARD IT IS TO GIVE FORGIVENESS**

Of course, this Parable is all about giving what we have been given—unconditional love, forgiveness, and grace—to other people. The inability—or maybe it would be more accurate to call it “**unwillingness**”—to forgive leads to emotional conflicts “within” and “between” us and others. . .and ultimately to a breakdown of interpersonal relationships.

But once our eyes are opened to see the enormity of our offense against God, the injuries which others have done to us begin to appear by comparison rather trifling. But we have a tendency to exaggerate our view of the offenses of others. . .and minimize our own. **It is the disparity between the size of debts that is the main point of the Parable.**

Think how this applies to you this morning. Think of the significant others in your life, your past:

- Parents who abused & hurt you (i.e.: physically, emotionally);
- Brothers & Sisters who failed you when you needed help, teased you, put you down;
- A friend who betrayed you;
- A sweetheart who rejected you;
- A marriage partner who promised to love, honor, comfort, and care for you; but instead criticizes you, has been unfaithful, or in some way caused you pain.

They all owe you a debt, don’t they?

- They owe you for the security & affirmation they took from you.
- They owe you for the childhood you lost.
- They owe you for the love & affection they withheld.

You’ve got to collect on the grievances. . .collect on the hurts.

You must make all those people who have hurt you hurt the way you have hurt.

## **MARRIAGES**

As married partners, we often come to see our mate as a person in debt to us.

*“You owe me all those expectations I had when I married you. Pay me what you owe me!”*

We marry each other for a lot of reasons. The person who is the “marriage potential”:

- Looks good
- Is neat and orderly
- Seems disciplined & hardworking, like somebody who’s going to go places, make lot of money
- Has personality strength, spiritual depth, or strong moral character that you admire.

When it doesn’t pan out as expected (i.e.: it rarely does), we grab each other by the throat with sarcasm & cutting remarks OR (the opposite) cold & emotional distance as if to say: “*You didn’t come through on your promissory note*”.

It’s all too easy to become debt-collectors (grievance-collectors) in our marriage.

Let me remind you this morning, your real debt—the one that separated you from your Creator—has been cancelled. God tore up the note at Calvary. If you haven’t accepted that, then why not make this the day that you do. Let it make you a grace-full, forgiving person to those around you (especially your marriage partner).

When you compare the debt you have been forgiven—and we need to be humble enough to acknowledge its enormity—when you really receive the forgiveness God freely offers, then how can you NOT forgive those who have wronged you. Yet some of us feel that we have to sweep a whole lot of stuff under the rug—and we’re not ready or willing to do that.

What does it mean to forgive? Let me give you a **WORD PICTURE**:

Forgiveness is letting go of the lever on a gas pump after the “debt” has run way up and gas is splashing out all over you and the people around you!

## CONCLUSION

I know there are some pretty big debts between folks out there. Things have happened to rupture trust and tear a relationship apart. You may have some anger & some resentment (or bitterness).

I’m asking you to do TWO things this morning, actually THREE:

1. ***Open your heart to receive the forgiveness that God offers freely in Christ Jesus---***
  - Let Him take all the sins, failures, hurts (including those which happened a long time ago) and wrap His loving purposes around them to change them.
  - Let the healing (or your spirit) begin!
  
2. ***Become willing to be willing to forgive that person(s) who has harmed you. . .to let go of the pump handle. . .to quit racking up the debt of resentment & bitterness.***
  - Maybe they’re long gone (dead).
  - Maybe the relationship is over and everybody’s moved on.
  - Maybe it’s a family member, a neighbor, a co-worker.

**Steps 8 & 9 of the 12-Step Program** say:

*“We made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all” . . . and then. . . “We made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.”*

You may think that’s only for alcoholics and drug addicts. But all of us have an addiction (“bent”) to sin. These two steps signify that you will never move along very far in your spiritual life until you’ve done your utmost to straighten out the past.

*“Becoming willing”* == 90%.

*Actually doing it* == the other 10%.

3. **Come to the Table of the Lord and celebrate the marvelous reconciliation that is in Him.**

- *“God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them; and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.” (II Cor. 5:19)*

By whatever means we can, let's get out of the debt-collecting business and start giving each other unconditional love. Paul says: *“Owe no one anything, but to love one another” (Romans 13:8).*

That doesn't mean we sweep real issues under the rug, and pretend they don't exist. It means we let each other off the hook. That along with the grace of God at work in our lives will make the difference. It will make real, lasting change possible. It will even make the restoration of a relationship possible.

**ILLUSTRATION** > Do you remember JOSEPH (in the Old Testament) who had been wronged and brutally beaten by his older brothers? When the tide turned the other way, and the brothers were groveling before Joseph (who had become a ruler, unbeknownst to them), he did not engage in debt-collecting. He certainly could have. Instead he made it easy for them to forgive themselves by saying: *“You planned evil against me (you intended to harm me), but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done—the saving of many lives.” (Genesis 50:20)*