

The Kingdom's Secret

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Bill Lewis
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
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Matthew 18:21-35 (NRSV)

Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Sermon

In the passage before us we find Jesus up to one of his favorite tricks. He has been asked a question, this time by Peter, and answers by telling a story. He did this on so many occasions. Ask him a question and you get a parable!

When that happens, a red flag of caution ought to slow down our thoughts. It's as though we are heading down the freeway, comfortable and secure in a certain line of inquiry, and suddenly a waving red flag appears in the road ahead of us. It's almost shouting, “Slow down, be careful, you have just run into a parable. Don't assume that the road will continue as before. You cannot be sure what is ahead. Slow down and pay attention!”

Jesus himself is the source for the cautionary red flag. Once the twelve disciples asked him about his preference for stories. Obviously puzzled by this recurring strategy of our Lord, they wanted to know, “Why do you always speak in parables?” (Matt. 13:10). Now I paraphrase his response. “I speak in parables,” Jesus said, “because the stories contain secrets, secrets of the kingdom of God, which not everyone has been given to know. Some will hear, but not hear. Some will see, but not see. Pay attention to what I say. Slow down so that you don't miss the secret in the parable.” (cf. Matt. 13:10 ff., 4:10 ff.) That's the red flag I'm talking about.

Robert Farrar Capon, Episcopal priest and wonderful exegete, has written three highly recommended books on the parables of Jesus: *Parables of the Kingdom*, *Parables of Grace*, *Parables of Judgment*. The parable before us, that of The Unmerciful Servant, is included in the second volume, and so is catalogued as one of the parables of grace. Capon suggests that we don't pay enough attention to the red flag I just mentioned because we too easily assume we already have mastered most of the parables. We know the

road ahead, and so hesitate to slow down when we come to an already-familiar story of Jesus. Think of the parable of the Prodigal Son . . . or the Good Samaritan. Who needs to pause when they are mentioned? Their very familiarity tempts us to keep moving, and we may whiz by their secret without seeing or hearing it. After all, it takes time to see or hear a secret. If you think you already know it, why slow down?

The tendency toward haste may be a particular hazard for those who are quite familiar with the Bible . . . like preachers . . . or others who style themselves as students of the Scriptures. I'll assume that we are agreed on the importance of learning the secret in the parable before us. Let's see if we can hear and see it.

The story is straightforward enough. A king forgives one of his slaves an incredible, astronomical debt who, in turn, will not forgive one of his creditors a debt that is minuscule by comparison. The slave receives mercy, but will not himself practice it. It is usually assumed that this parable is mainly about gratitude, gratitude for being forgiven which, in turn, ought to lead one to forgive others. The accusation of the King points in that direction: "I forgave your debt. Shouldn't you similarly, and for that reason, forgive your debtors?" So we go on our way. We assume that is what the parable is about.

The Heidelberg Catechism seems to adopt that approach in its third part, the part devoted to grateful living, which says we are to do good "so that we may show that we are thankful to God for all he has done for us" (LD 32). That may help to account for the inclination among Reformed Christians to speak of the debt of gratitude that ought to call us to a thankful life. Let me put it this way. Haven't you heard it argued that we are to do good . . . be kind, to be forgiving, to be generous, etc., etc., all because God has been generous to us? Grace ought to beget grateful living. In a nutshell that's the usual take on this parable.

I have a friend, a former student of OSU, who testifies to this sort of powerful connection between grace and gratitude. He has been extraordinarily generous to some people I know, and the reason, he says, is because folks at the United Christian Center were very generous to him during his years at OSU. So now, because of that, he is obliged to be generous to others, his way of settling a debt from the past. I'm quite certain that you have heard this before. I am also certain that gratitude for grace is appropriate and one ought to worry if it doesn't show up in a Christian's life. But I am also quite certain that gratitude for grace IS NOT the secret of this parable. In fact, I would argue that interpreting the parable merely to teach gratitude for grace, or making that the main point of theology and ethics, stands in the way of the secret which this parable contains. Now I've got to tell you why I've come to this conclusion.

Let's go back to the story, and pay close attention to its details. The slave has clearly lived a life encumbered with debt, all of which is duly recorded in the account ledger of the King. The slave knows all about accounts. He has his own ledger of accounts in which the 100-day's-wages-debt of a fellow slave is duly recorded. His life is bounded by obligations, all spelled out in accounts, some recording monies he owes, others recording monies owed to him. These accounts define the boundaries of his life. Here's a man all of us know only too well. He is one of us. Our lives are made up of accounts, what's ours and what isn't. Accounts everywhere! Bank accounts, mortgage accounts, credit card accounts, loan accounts, investment accounts. Will the list never end? To say nothing of the "accounts" that catalog the obligations we have to spouses, children, relatives, friends, colleagues in those never-ending circles of relationships that fill the moments of our lives. You know what I'm talking about. Be nice to me, and I'll be nice to you. I've scratched your back. Now you scratch mine. Living seems to come down to managing accounts, accounts of all kinds. We know this guy really well. Managing our accountability, keeping the ledger of life in balance, keeping track of obligations . . . we are all familiar with that story. It is built into the warp and woof of the social-political-economic system in which we live. It's the way our world works. It makes up the world-view that takes us to school, to work, to our homes . . . and eventually to our death.

So, though it's hard to comprehend, maybe we shouldn't be too surprised that the slave tells the king to give him time and he will pay what he owes. In spite of the astronomical size of the debt! A talent represented 15 years of a common laborer's income. 15 years! This slave owes the king 10,000 talents! Ten thousand times 15! That's 150,000 years of a common laborer's earnings! And he says he will pay it back! For sure, a ridiculous promise. But the slave can't imagine anything else. In a world defined by, bounded by accounts, ruled by accounts, paying off debts is at least where the conversation must always begin.

But notice what happens. The king takes the account book, rips out the page containing the slave's record, and destroys it. The account is gone. It no longer exists. It has been buried in the garbage. As far as the king is concerned the account is a dead. Or, as Capon suggests, you could say that the king has died to the debt. It no longer counts for anything. In canceling the account, the king invites the slave to step out of one world-view into another . . . one way of seeing himself, the king, and others . . . for another. A world without accounts! We are getting close to the secret of this parable.

A world without accounts. This is not an isolated theme of the Bible. Remember the parable of the Prodigal Son. He comes back home and tries to talk of an account, but his father will not hear of it. Rather, a party is arranged, as we know, to the consternation of the older brother. Or recall that verse in Ps. 103:12 – “As far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us” – no accounts there! Here we have the secret of this parable.

The slave cannot imagine a world without accounts. That's why he says he will repay the debt. Perversely, he may even think he has been forgiven because he promised to repay. A life without accounts is, for him, no life at all. That's why he throws a fellow slave into prison on account of 100 denarii, a measly sum in comparison to 10,000 talents. Despite the invitation of the king to enter another world, another reality, the slave insists on staying where he is. He refuses to die to a world of accounts. He will continue to live . . . and likely die in the world of accounts . . . in spite of the offer to be free of that cursed world.

Thus, the parable is not mainly about gratitude. It's not simply about juggling obligations in this world, but about leaving them behind for a new world. It's not merely about shifting one's priorities while living in the same old house. It's about moving into an altogether new one. It is about deciding where one shall live, and by what terms one shall live by in that new place. It's about conversion, about turning one's back on one world and embracing another. It's about whether one will die to the world of accounts, as the king has, and enter the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew's term) . . . or stay in the shadow lands of a world whose prince is darkness itself, and whose terms are estrangement and isolation, a foretaste of hell! Therein lies the secret of this parable. There is a place without accounts because the compassion of its king has ruled them out. There's the secret.

The story ends on a tragic note. To the slave the king says, “OK. If you are going to insist on accounts, then pay the debt or it's to prison you go.” In case we are wondering about that conclusion of the story, it may be worth quoting Capon. He writes:

The sole difference, therefore, between hell and heaven is that in heaven the forgiveness is accepted and passed along, while in hell it is rejected and blocked. In heaven, the death of the king [to accounts] is welcomed and becomes the doorway to new life in the resurrection. In hell, the old life of the bookkeeping world is insisted on and becomes, forever, the pointless torture it always was. (Parables of Grace, p. 50)

Two things remain to be said. First, let's remember this parable is in response to a question posed by Peter, how are brothers and sisters in the household of faith to treat one another, especially when that is complicated by our sins against one another. That's the focus of the parable. It may have implications for how we treat neighbors, or even enemies, but Jesus told other stories to answer our questions about those

issues. It's best to keep his stories in context, and this one has to do with the way we treat brothers and sisters. The parable's answer to the question of Peter is this: there are no accounts for brothers and sisters in the Kingdom of Heaven. Everyone goes past "Go" without penalty or a burdensome account from the past. So, in the Kingdom of Heaven we are to be driven, not by obligation, by keeping score, by counting, but by a joyful sense of place, by knowing where we are, namely in the Realm of a compassionate king, who himself has died to accounts. That is why Peter's question makes no sense. Forgiveness in the Kingdom cannot be reduced to numbers. It is a way of life.

I don't know whether I'll ever be able to fully comprehend what this means. It's so revolutionary; so subversive of my pride and pretenses; such a threat to my theological assurances and formulations; so bizarre, outrageous, weird and foreign in its ethical implications; so contrary to the rules the world prescribes for spouses, children and friends; so difficult to comprehend and explain to myself, to others, to children, let alone live by. So, I can do no better than return to the story again and again, asking God that its secret become incarnate in my life. I know it will be the same for you.

Secondly, the parable has important implications for the celebration of the Lord's Supper. I like the way we celebrate the feast. We leave our seats and move to the place where the body and blood of the Lord are. His cross and resurrection, more than anything else, display a Lord who refuses to be limited by, bound by, controlled by, accounts! By our movement from our seats we, in effect, say we are not going to stay where we are, in the world of accounts, but will set our face toward a realm where they no longer exist. Getting on our feet, we thereby proclaim that we shall die to the old world, and embrace in profound joy a new one. Of course, we are thankful as we remember what the Lord has done, but there is more here than thanksgiving. There is a dying and rising to a new life, a new order of things. So come! The king is waiting! Hallelujah!