

**Extravagance
Matthew 18: 21-35
Don Lincoln**

A colleague of mine tells the following story:

In the congregation I once served in Manhattan, our Ash Wednesday service was one in which we renewed our baptismal vows rather than distribute ashes. Everyone was invited to come forward to the front of the sanctuary. With a generous amount of water, the pastors made the sign of the cross on open palms as we spoke the words, "Remember your baptism, you are a child of God." One Ash Wednesday, an elderly woman came forward and extended her well-worn hands before me. But what truly caught my attention was the deep distress on her face.

After I made the sign of the cross, she paused for a very long time looking at her wet palms. Then, like she might do when washing at the end of a long, difficult day, she rubbed the water from the sign of the cross all over her face. The words of Psalm 51 took on life right before my eyes. "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sins."¹

That's the spirit with which I want us to approach this challenging text from the Gospel of Matthew. First – with an overwhelming sense of awe and gratitude at the extravagance of God's grace – for God's willingness to eliminate our entire debt – all of it. And second – what sort of spirit that might generate in us – as we deal with one another and the world around us.

First, the story. A king and his slaves. As you can tell, slavery in the Greco-Roman world, though despicable, was different from European and American chattel slavery. Greco-Roman enslavement was for the most part not racially based, but conquest based. Conquerors often enslaved those whom they conquered. The conquerors also recognized many of the persons they enslaved were highly skilled, highly intelligent, or both. Conquerors therefore often employed those whom they enslaved as leaders in their business or personal affairs.

It appears the king in the parable did the same with those whom he had enslaved. They clearly worked for him, and he entrusted to at least some of them almost limitless financial discretion over his resources. Which is where the problem comes in.

One of the persons whom the king has enslaved has scandalously diminished the king's treasury to the point where he now owes the king ten thousand talents. How much is a talent? One talent was 15 years' wages for a day laborer. Ten thousand times 15 years' wages – Ten thousand talents? Think billions; an outlandish amount of money.

How in the world the slave managed to lose that much money is certainly a mystery. But it is crystal clear he would never manage to pay it back.² So, the king decides to sell the man and his entire family and their possessions and get what he can for them. Cut his losses now, and get something out of the deal.

But the slave falls on his knees – and begs for time. “Be patient with me, and I will pay you everything.” How ridiculous is this? The slave knows that isn’t going to happen. Does he believe the King is that stupid of a bookkeeper, who can’t spot a losing proposition when it slithers up on him?³ The king knows there’s no way this slave will ever be able to recoup that loss.

But instead of agreeing to whatever payment plan the slave wants to put into place, the King ignores his nonsense about repayment; he ignores the whole business of bookkeeping, and simply forgives it all. Wipes out the debt. Forgets it ever existed. Does, in short, what the servant – with all his creative bookkeeping – cannot ever conceive of anyone ever doing.

For we, who like to keep the ledgers straight; who like things balanced, **at least, and especially, when it’s about something owed to US**, such extravagance is beyond imagining. And the point is, when that kind of extravagance is given to you and me, it’s not just wash-your-whole-face good news – it’s wash-your-heart, your-mind, your-very-being. When it’s relief from **that amount of debt**, it’s like being raised from the dead. It’s like resurrection!

It’s what the Apostle Paul commends to the Ephesians: “I pray that you may have the power to comprehend.....what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” (Eph 3:18)

That’s the parable Jesus tells in response to Peter’s question, “How many times must we forgive, Lord?” Jewish law said 3 times. Peter doubles that and adds one for good measure. “Seven times, Lord?” No Peter. Not seven times. Not seventy-seven times; or as the Greek text may imply, not even seventy **times** seven times. Think numbers bigger than you can imagine, Peter. Like think ten-thousand times 15 years’ wages worth. Think billions worth.

This, Jesus says, is what God has done with us. And in the bookkeeping world where you and I live, it’s ridiculous enough to be laughable. In fact, any time you and I understand the fullness of it – comprehend it as Paul suggests – we should laugh until we cry. Because of the immensity of it all.

For you and I know, our first tendency is to barter with God – just like the slave – “Be patient with me, God” – “I’ll do better, God...” All the while knowing there is no way we could ever repair the ruptures we have created with God; no way we can justify the wrongs we have committed, no way to pay off the debts you and I have amassed in our living.⁴

But here’s the point. In the old, “When were you saved?” language, for many of us, we’ll say it was when we came to understand the immensity of God’s forgiveness and grace, actualized in Jesus on the cross – when we understood that as the heart of our salvation. But too many of us think that’s the **whole** point. And this parable tells us it’s not.

Understanding God's immense and extravagant forgiveness is not the culmination, or the pinnacle, any more than it is the end of your Christian life – it is rather the beginning of it; the start of it; the first breath of the rest of your life of gratitude, generosity and service to neighbor.

God is indeed, more than willing to do the dirty work of blotting out our transgressions, washing us from our iniquity, cleansing us from our sin. Because God is also betting that you and I will have been transformed by His forgiveness into the kind of people who can do the hard work of forgiving and loving others. God knows His mercy can have a surprising effect – it can create a community of people who will do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly.

Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. We say it each week. You see, it is illogical and should be impossible to accept the great mercy of the Lord and then refuse to extend mercy to others. In the divine economy of the kingdom of God, you cannot have one without the other. "Seven times?" Peter asks. Seventy-seven times. Maybe 490 times. The point is, if you and I are still keeping count, we're not there yet.

Because forgiveness is a way of life, and never some isolated, occasional act of heroism. Forgiveness is the constant homework of Christians. Unfinished business. Always.⁵

And, if we don't get it. We don't get it. That's what happens to the unforgiving servant. The text says he's handed over to be tortured, until he can pay his entire debt. Which he never can. Sounds like vengeance. No – it's actually what you and I get, when we keep that ledger mentality.

I know a man in NJ whose son got hooked on drugs in college and publicly disgraced the family name. That father has refused to speak to his own son for 30 years. The father is a bitter, unhappy man. Imprisoned; tortured by his inability to forgive.

I know two parents from a town in Indiana whose daughter married a man they did not like. They refused to attend the wedding, and today the daughter and son-in-law will not let the grandparents see their grandchildren. Ledger keeping breeds ledger keeping. The walls of resentment grow high.

I know two sisters, both in their eighties, who belong to the same church in North Carolina, yet who sit on opposite sides of the sanctuary every Sunday because of a dispute over a family will that separated them more than 40 years ago. They will probably both go to their death with anger in their hearts, unless forgiveness is comprehended, and becomes a way of life for them.

Like the debt numbers in the parable, you and I have been recipients of forgiveness and grace in amounts larger than we can begin to count. Each of us has known God's steadfast love, constant favor, and unlimited forgiveness in the face of our regular betrayal. I strongly suspect not one of us hopes we are judged on the ledger of our own goodness in response to God's abundant grace.⁶

If you and I do not forgive the minor transgressions of our human experience, in light of the outrageous abundance of the way **WE** have been forgiven, we are at risk of being convicted alongside the unforgiving slave. And will end up being tortured by our ledger-balancing attitudes toward one another; imprisoned by our own devices – selfish, self-centered, self-focused, which ends up leaving us alone, bitter, hard and empty.

Today kicks off our annual Fall giving campaign – our stewardship season for the 2021 operating budget. In the same way this parable asks what is our capacity to forgive, in comparison to the debt we've been forgiven, in stewardship, you and I are invited to ponder once again, what is the size of our gratitude in response to the outrageously extravagant, overflowing blessings God has given to us?

For 20 years, day in and day out, I've seen this congregation respond in generosity. In so many ways – Family Promise as you've heard is just one of them. I'll name just one more. When this pandemic began, how many people emailed to say, "Don, I don't need my stimulus check. Can I do something for someone in the congregation who needs help because of what is going on." And how many emails have continued to come in and say, "Don, if the COVID-19 fund gets depleted, please let me know."

So friends, let's you and I wash our face with the overflowing forgiveness, grace and blessing of the Lord. And let it transform you and me – and inspire in us hearts overflowing with mercy, generosity, forgiveness and love.

May it be so. Thanks be to God. AMEN.

1. Jan Ammon, Minister of the Chapel; Princeton Theological Seminary; 2020 Lenten Devotional.
2. Brian Blount, President of Union Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Richmond, VA; Sermon on the text, "*Dadgummit, Jesus!*", shared on "A Sermon for Every Sunday", September 10, 2020. I am grateful for Brian's retelling of this parable. Personal aside: Brian lived down the hall from me my second and third years of seminary. He is a superb New Testament Scholar, who pastored a church for six years, went back to school for his PhD, taught New Testament at Princeton Seminary for 15 years, and has been President of Union Presbyterian Seminary since 2007.
3. Robert Farrar Capon; "*Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*;" chapter on the text.
4. Will Willimon, Pulpit Resource, September 14, 2008.
5. Dock Hollingsworth, Feasting on the Gospels; Matthew, Vol. 2, commentary on the Text.