

**Forgiveness, Part 3:
When Forgiveness is Not Possible**

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Scripture: Matthew 18:21-35

One of the most audacious and, frankly, horrifying parables Jesus ever tells in the Bible is the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant in Matthew 18. It starts with a servant who owes his king a lot of money. Specifically, he owes him 10,000 *talents*.

If you're not familiar with how much a biblical *talent* is, allow me clarify: A *talent* is the equivalent of 6,000 *denarii*.

Still confused? Let me further clarify: One *denarius* is the equivalent of a single day's wages for a day laborer. To convert a *denarius* into a today's equivalent, using the current minimum wage for the State of Connecticut of \$14/hr, one *denarius* is worth about \$112.

So, doing the math, we find that 10,000 talents is 10,000 x 6,000 denarii, or 60 million day's wages. Sixty million day's wages for a common laborer in Connecticut equals = \$6.72 billion dollars. If we give our hypothetical day-laborer a nickel-an-hour raise, we can round that figure off to an even \$7B. That's a handsome sum! Though it would take a day laborer over 164,000 years to earn it.

Apparently, the king decided that the servant's debts had mounted so high that he might default on the loan. So, he called the servant in and ordered him to pay his debt right then and there, *in full*.

When the man couldn't pay up, the king commanded that the servant, along with his wife, children, and all his possessions be sold so that at least a portion of the debt could be repaid.

Falling on his knees before the king, the servant begged for patience, promising to repay him if given more time.

Apparently, the king was a lot more merciful and generous than the story heretofore would suggest. Moved by pity for his servant, the king did not just give him more time to pay. He *forgave him the entire debt!* What kind of king does this??

No king does this, of course. The "king" in Jesus's parable is really a metaphor for God. The "servant" is a metaphor for us. "Debt" is a metaphor for sin. Through this parable, one very positive thing Jesus teaches us is that God is so incredibly merciful and generous that God is willing to forgive us for essentially any and every sin we could ever commit.

Incidentally, while this story is "just" a parable, I discovered in 1981 that this level of love, generosity, and forgiveness in God is quite real – when I had the mystical experience I preached about two weeks ago. When we turn our hearts to God, we are turning toward a God whose will really is to forgive us for everything because God vastly prefers relationship over our

perfection. And God is willing to forgive us over and over again, when we turn to God, just as Jesus instructs us to do when someone who has hurt us turns back and seeks genuine, healthy relationship. Only, where Jesus instructs us to forgive the same person as much as seventy-seven times, *when there is repentance*, the number of times God is willing to forgive seems quite a bit higher. Perhaps seventy million times seven?

If forgiving the servant's enormous debt were the end of Jesus's parable, this might be the happiest teaching in all of scripture. Seek forgiveness, and you will find it. As much as you could possibly need! But the parable continues ...

As soon as the servant leaves the king, the servant comes upon someone who owes him 100 *denarii* – the equivalent of just over \$11,000 in Connecticut today.

“Pay what you owe,” he demands. In response, the man falls to his knees and pleads for patience. One would think that, after being forgiven \$7 billion after he himself pleaded for patience, the servant would not only give this man more time, but do what the king did and cancel his debt entirely. It's paltry by comparison. Instead, the unforgiving servant had the man thrown into debtor's prison until he could pay the debt.

When his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were appalled, and reported what the servant had done to the king. Naturally, the king blew a gasket. Summoning the unforgiving servant before him, he cried, “You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?”

Jesus says that, in his anger, the king handed the servant over to be tortured until he could pay the entire debt. Then, Jesus adds, “*So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from the heart.*”

This might be a good time to ask if anyone in the congregation would like to ask us to forgive you for anything! Having been reminded of this parable, I will happily forgive you for any sin you've committed against me – ever! Heck, I'll even forgive you for *future* sins, just so long as I am never – ever – in the position of that unforgiving servant ...

Of course, if you were here two weeks ago and heard me recount my 1981 experience, you know that I am convinced to the marrow of my bones that the God of Jesus loves each one of us, without exception, well beyond our capabilities to ever comprehend. I am equally convinced that, because God loves us this way, there is absolutely no such thing as hell – not in the sense of it being a place of eternal torture.

No, if God is truly as loving as Jesus says God is, and my experience confirms this for me, then any unfinished business we have with God after we die may very well be the subject of *correction*, but never punishment as an end in itself – in other words, torture.

So what is Jesus getting at when he tells a parable about God handing over the Unforgiving Servant to be tortured? Something just doesn't seem right, does it?

When I run into scriptural conundrums, I find it helpful to remind myself that the ultimate metaphor Jesus uses for God is not king or creditor but *Parent*. Whether you call God Father or Mother really doesn't matter so long as it gets you looking for God in the right direction.

When the question, "What would Jesus do?" (WWJD) is uncertain – like when he deliberately yanks our chain by using the word "torture" – it is often helpful to ask, "What would the Most Loving Parent in the Universe do?" (WWMLPUD?) [By the way, I think asking WWMLPUD is precisely what Jesus wants us to do! (WWJD)]

Put yourself in God, the Loving Parent's shoes. If you had eternity to live with your children, and you love your children as much as you love your own life, then when your children act out, would you torture them? You might apply "tough love," but it would still be love, not torture. You might put them in situations meant to help them learn from their mistakes and become more mature and loving children as a result.

One thing you would absolutely NOT do, besides torture them, is allow your children run around for all of eternity acting like spoiled brats, fighting with each other, calling each other names, and stealing from each other. Personally, that's my definition of hell!

Speaking of hell, what loving parent would throw their children into a burning lake of fire to be tortured if they acted out? More often than not, those of us who are parents are busy helping our children out of the lakes of fire they get themselves into! What makes you think God is any different?

In the case of the Unforgiving Servant – who is himself a child of God – we need to remember that Jesus is speaking in metaphors not just when he refers to a king and a servant, but when he uses the word "torture." God does not literally torture people – even people who owe God \$7B worth in debt.

Another thing to bear in mind is, to quote Protestant Reformer John Calvin, when God speaks to us, "God lisps." Even the word "speak" when applied to God is a product of God "lispering"! It's kind of like explaining nuclear physics to a 6-year-old. God comes from a place of far greater consciousness and awareness than we do. In order to communicate with us, God must "speak" at our level of awareness, in a way that we can comprehend. Even to say God "speaks" is a lisp!

Thus, when Jesus says "torture," and we know it's a metaphor ... and we are assured that God is the Most Loving Parent in the Universe ... and we can assume that God is lispering ... then we should think less about actual "torture" and more about "tough love."

From the Unforgiving Servant's point-of-view, he might think of "tough love" as torture, but what rebellious child doesn't consider even the most "loving correction" to be a form of torture? We humans have all kinds of words we apply to God's "loving correction" – and none of them are pretty.

The Hindus and Buddhists call this kind of divine correction Karma, or the Law of Causation. Karma dictates that all actions have consequences which will affect the doer of the action at some future time, including a future life.

So, if you are a jerk to people, don't be surprised if people act like jerks to you. If you have been a jerk all your life, all the way up to the point you die, a Buddhist or Hindu is not going to wonder whether or not God has forgiven you, or if you are headed to heaven or hell. Their question might be, "How many thousands of years will this person go on being a jerk until they finally wake up?"

While Christianity does not teach a specific notion of reincarnation or Karma, Jesus does teach that our soul lives on after our body dies. He does *not* teach the specific way or ways that we might live on. We just know that whatever realm we inhabit after we die is ruled by God.

Since everywhere we look in this world is governed by the Law of Evolution, and God is our Creator, we might very well anticipate that "going to heaven" is a process as much as a destination. We'll experience heaven's fullness eventually, but the trip may be more gradual, with many lessons yet to learn.

Many of Jesus's teachings are at very least suggestive of some sort of Karmic principle at work. For instance, here are seven off the top of my head:

1. Do to others as you would have them do to you (Matthew 7:12)
2. Do not judge, or you too will be judged (Matthew 7:1)
3. Give, and it will be given to you (Luke 6:38)
4. Forgive and you will be forgiven (Luke 6:37)
5. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. (Matthew 5:7)
6. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven." (Matthew 16:19)
7. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained. (John 20:23) [One wonders, retained by *whom*?]

These statements imply that we may still have some kinks to work out after we die, enroute to our ultimate destination.

"But didn't Jesus tell one of the thieves who were crucified alongside him on Good Friday 'you will be with me in Paradise?'" you ask. "Doesn't this imply not gradual evolution but a direct pass to the gates of heaven?"

My response is, it very well might! But wouldn't even a major upgrade from the conditions here on earth be experienced as Paradise to any of us, let alone a thief who had only experienced this world's darker side? I have the feeling that we know quite little of what Paradise looks and feels like, and how many levels of Paradise there may be.

Really, when you think about it, a direct upload into the realm's ultimate Paradise might just be considered Hell by someone whose soul had not yet adequately evolved to experience it. When I was a kid, I thought kissing girls was a form of torture. I eventually realized it is quite heavenly!

When I consider God “torturing” the Unforgiving Servant, I can picture God putting him in a realm where he has to live only with people who are so brilliantly generous that it makes him nauseated. He’s got to live in this world, being “tortured” by all these uproariously happy do-gooders until he finally wakes up and discovers the true joy of being generous himself. In which case, he would not consider remaining in this world to be torture, but a great *reward*!

Bottom line, I take away two important lessons from Jesus’s parable of the Unforgiving Servant.

First: I never want to be the Unforgiving Servant. Since I have received a boatload of forgiveness myself in this life, then if someone hurts me and is truly repentant, honestly seeking to change their behavior toward me ... well, I don’t want the kind of Karma that comes with being that stingy. Do you? (Even if Karma is just another word for “tough love”?)

The second lesson I take away from the parable of the Unforgiving Servant is, coincidentally, a lesson about what to do about people for whom true forgiveness is not possible. That is, when they hurt you and are entirely unrepentant, having no desire to change their behavior because they have no notion that they need to receive forgiveness in the first place.

The lesson I take from the parable is this: Since I have experienced God’s supreme forgiveness, then provided I am not like the Unforgiving Servant but do forgive those I am actually able to forgive, then I am a very rich man. I have every reason to rejoice and be glad about my life in the here-and-now, and in the hereafter.

I am so rich and blessed, in fact, that if someone hurts me over and over, and intends to hurt me some more, I may not be required to forgive the person, but I also have no inner need to make their life more miserable than it already is by hurting them back. Actions have consequences. I’m happy to leave those consequences up to God and simply step away from the relationship.

Really, God is much better at assigning corrections than I am anyway. The corrections that a loving God subjects a person to may make a person who stands in need of correction feel as if they’re being “tortured,” but they are really intended to turn a stingy person into a generous one, a prideful person into a humble one, a lustful person into a loving one, and an angry person into a joyful one.

On the other hand, if I seek to play God and deliver “tough love” to a person who has harmed me, I am far more likely to act out of anger, fear, and insecurity than true love. Chances are, I’ll end up doing something that I myself will need to ask forgiveness for. So, I try to remain as self-aware as possible, leaving the “tough love” up to God.

I choose, as much as I am humanly able, to devote my energies to loving and forgiving those with whom I am actually meant to be in relationship, and let God take care of the rest.