

God's Grace and Human Folly

Matthew 18:23-34

Parables were told to mess with our minds and heart. They draw us in and then turn the tables on us. They turn the everyday world upside down.

Jesus told hundreds of them, but it was an ancient Hebrew way of uncovering the truth.

You may remember the prophet Nathan's parable. King David had committed a horrible sin. He had taken Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, as his own by sending Uriah to the front-lines of the battle to be killed.

Nathan came to David and told him this story: There was a rich man and a poor man. The rich man had many flocks. The poor man had one ewe lamb. His family raised his lamb, played with the lamb, let the lamb eat from their table. He became a beloved pet to his children.

A traveler came to the rich man's house and the rich man threw him a lavish dinner. He had many lambs, but he had the poor man's lamb confiscated so he could serve it for the dinner.

When David heard the story, he exploded in anger and said the rich man deserved death! Nathan then said, “Thou art the man”. David recognized the painful truth and said “I have sinned against the Lord” (II Samuel 12:1-13).

Jesus told parables that did the same thing. They lured us into the story, then we’d find ourselves confronted by a truth we had been avoiding , or, by a grace we never thought we’d receive.

So let’s look at today’s parable. Matthew has framed the parable with verses before and after that make a point about the importance of forgiveness in the Christian community. But I want to offer it in the form that I believe is closer to the original way Jesus told it and to show it was making a broader point about the Unimaginable Grace of God.

I

It begins with a scene involving a Gentile King and his head servant, an official with servants under him.

The king was settling his accounts when his official came in who owed the king ten thousand talents. It was an astronomical amount—equal to the total tax receipts of a small country in the Middle East. It is mind boggling, intentionally so. It is beyond our calculations, a fantastical amount. In other words, it is unpayable, and the debtor is doomed.

When the man cried out he could not repay it, the king had the man, his wife and children along with all their possessions sold to pay against the debt.

The official fell down on his knees and begged, “Have patience, Lord, I will pay back everything!”

The king took pity on him, released him and forgave the astronomical debt.

We are relieved for the man and his family; our hearts are warmed by the king’s kind mercy. The man and his family have their lives back again. Grace!

II

Next scene. The official went out and came upon a man who was his servant and who owed him 100 denarii. It is not a small amount, about a 100 day’s wages for a laborer at that time. But it is infinitesimal compared to the size of the debt the official had just been forgiven. If any of you accountant types are interested, it was $1/600,000^{\text{th}}$ the amount.

Are you getting the picture? The official then seized the man by the throat and said, “Pay me what you owe!” The man begged him for patience so he could repay him.

Now the shocker. The official refused the man’s plea and had him thrown into prison until he could repay the debt. (As if that could ever happen.) Debtor’s prison for life.

III

Next scene. The servant's fellow servants see what has happened and are royally mad. They go to the king and report what the official had done to their fellow servant. Sometimes it is O.K. to report what you have seen. It can even save lives.

When the king heard the report he summoned the official and said.

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?

Then the king had him handed over to be tortured until he could repay his entire debt.

That's how the original parable probably ended. Matthew, as I said, added verses before and after to make it a parable about God's forgiveness and our obligation to forgive—which is part of the memory of the story, but not all of it.

IV

First of all, most important of all, this is a story about God's stupendous, unimaginable grace.

Annie Dillard says that we catch grace like a man holding his cup under a waterfall. God's grace is that enormous, overwhelming, unending. It is like your debt the size of the national debt has been suddenly forgiven.

But grace is more than pardon; it is blessing too, all the goodness of life we have received from God. And it is love, unfathomable, unconditional love, a love that as the hymn goes, "never lets us go." And it is power too, God's power in you to grow you up to be who God has made you to be. Pardon, blessing, love, power. Life!

And we are like the man under the waterfall with our cups in our hands, catching grace, soggy wet, drenched in grace.

The parable first is about God's grace, beautiful and full beyond our imagining.

V

But it is also about human folly, the folly of not recognizing the grace that has been given to us and to all. We are like the man born on third base who thinks he has hit a triple. What we have we have darned well earned. The quip is true: "The problem with a self-made man is that he worships his creator."

As often as we sing *Amazing Grace*, I think that somewhere inside think that it's all been us!

Amazing *deeds* how sweet the sound

I've done it all myself!

I've told you about the millionaire who died in one of my churches soon after I'd arrived as pastor. His grief-stricken widow came into my office so we could plan the funeral service. She said her husband wanted two songs for his funeral: *Amazing Grace* and Frank Sinatra's *My Way*. I did my best to work with her to honor her husband's wishes. But later I thought: This is the American Religion in all its contradictions! Could there be two songs more opposite in spirit? We sing God's grace yet, inwardly believe it's all us!

We know the song by heart:

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound

that saved a wretch like me.

I know, some don't like the word "wretch" there. I get it at one level: some have been so beaten up by guilt-based religion, they don't want another lesson in human wretchedness. Some hymn writers have taken the word out to make us a more respectable kind of group.

Amazing grace how sweet the sound

that saved a reasonably good person like me.

I once was somewhat lost

but now am found
was nearsighted but now I see!

I spoof. But listen now to the words of *My Way*. Can I have some string music now?

And now the end is near
And so I face the final curtain.
My friend, I'll say it clear,
I'll state my case
of which I'm certain.
I've lived a life that's full
I traveled each and every highway.
But more, much more than this,
I did it my way.

Regrets, I've had a few
But then again, too few to mention.
I did what I had to do
And saw it through without exemption.
I planned each charted course
Each careful step along the by-way.

But more, much more than this,

I've done it my way.

That song? Or this:

Through many dangers, toils and snares

I have already come.

'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far

And grace will lead me home.

Which song would you choose? Which song will you choose when you stand before God? That's the choice the parable places before us: the spirituality of *Amazing Grace* or the *hubris* of *My Way*.

VI

But there's one more crucial turn the parable takes, and it asks: What will you do with this matchless grace you have been given? Will you keep it for yourself, or will you pass it on? Will you hoard it or share it? We who have been graced beyond measure can be pretty stingy with it!

Will you set others free from the debts they owe when all your debts have been forgiven? Or will you withhold the grace you have been given?

The forgiveness you give sets people free. It also sets you free.

The Greek word for forgiveness means to *loose*, to loose people from their sins. It is a double loosing; they are set free from guilt and shame. And you are set free from resentment and the grudges that eat at your soul.

I am not talking about the dangerous kind of forgiveness that sets you up to be hurt and hurt again. I'm talking about the kind that gives both you and the one who harmed you a new future.

VII

It all goes back to God and God's immeasurable, unending grace, grace that is pardon, blessing, love, power and *life!*

It's the grace that forgives and sets things right—in all arenas of life. It is the grace that welcomes home the prodigal and throws a homecoming feast. It is the grace that cancels debts and restores relationship. It is the grace that turns churches from country clubs into hospitals for the lost and broken.

It is the grace that brings us here today and to this table of grace.