

## **The Parable of the Unmerciful Debtor**

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The Saviour said more than once, Forgive, and ye shall be forgiven (Luke 6:37; cf. Mark 11:25-26), setting forgiveness of our neighbours by us as the indispensable condition for forgiveness of us by the Lord. In one of Christ's talks with His disciples on this theme, His instruction on the loving and cautious reproof of a brother who has sinned evoked a question from the Apostle Peter concerning how many times one must forgive someone who has offended. According to the teaching of the lawyers, one could forgive only three times. The Apostle Peter, desiring to exceed the righteousness of the Old Testament, increased this number to seven. But Christ, Who had been teaching the need to make one's heart pure and bright by all-forgiving love, answers, that one must forgive until seventy times seven, that is, one must forgive an unlimited number of times. In order that this would become clear to Peter, Christ gave a vivid example in the parable of the unmerciful debtor.

The meaning of this parable is transparently clear. The king is the Lord, to Whom all power is given...in heaven and in earth (Matthew 28:18). The king's servants are we people - insolvent debtors before the Lord. Although we, according to our sinfulness, are unworthy of God's loving-kindness, the Lord, through the death of His Son on the Cross, has forgiven us our offences.

The kingdom of heaven [is] likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants. That which takes place in the Kingdom of Heaven, in the Church of Christ, can be likened to the occasion when the king in the parable wanted to settle accounts with his servants, that is, to require an accounting from them. The King of Heaven has the right to require an accounting of all our thoughts and desires, our words and deeds at any time, whenever He "wants". We must be ready to give Him this accounting. This means to live not just anyhow, but to order our life according to the laws of the Gospel. It is a great mercy from God, when He wants to settle accounts with us in this world, that is, to bring us to a consciousness of the necessity to pay off our debts through repentance. It is most fearful when we depart with our debts to the other world, where there will no longer be a possibility for repentance.

And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents, we read further in the parable. The servant was brought to the king, was set before the face of God. In the parable, it is said that the king's servant was brought. The monetary amount of ten thousand talents was an enormous sum and in a metaphorical sense means a numberless quantity. In those Gospel times, the words "million" and "billion" were not even in use. Among different nations, the value of the talent varied; but they all represented a monetary amount of enormous value. The debt weighed upon the servant; he wanted, more than anything else on earth, to be delivered of it, and, although it was fearful for him, still, he probably was glad for the opportunity to stand before the king and entreat him for an extension. Therefore, one may say with certainty that he was not brought forcibly to the king's court, but rather in accordance with an insistent invitation.

And our fall is so great that we ourselves are not able to come to God. Only a very few people, who are pure in heart, come to Him on their own initiative. The majority of sinners are brought, namely -

by the prayers of the saints, or by afflictions, misfortunes, illnesses and other trials, which help us to break away from passionate attachments to this world and remind us to begin thinking about life after life. Moreover, the Lord sends us experienced spiritual directors, living people or the instructions of the Holy Fathers in books. This then is what brought signifies.

According to the interpretation of Blessed Theophylact, the Archbishop of Bulgaria, the unusual debtor is not one man, but all of humanity. Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov writes that each of our sins is significant, since by each we offend God - a Person infinitely great. Each of our sins is like the talent in the parable. The ten thousand talents are our sins against God's Ten Commandments, our debts of ingratitude for all of God's innumerable mercies toward us. We live in sin and with each day we increase our debt before God.

But forasmuch as he had not to pay - we read further in this parable - his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. This seeming cruelty of the king is disturbing to some. Why was it necessary for the lord to sell both the wife and the children and all that the servant had? After all, while held in even greater bondage, he would never be able to pay off his debt. Hierarch John Chrysostom explains why, namely, the king acted thus: "Not out of cruelty or inhumanity, but in order to frighten the servant, and thereby to spur him on to submissiveness, without any intention of selling him! For, if he had had this in mind, then he would not have heeded his request and would not have shown him his loving-kindness. He only wanted to make the servant understand how many debts he was forgiving him, and through this means to compel him to be more lenient toward his fellow-debtor. For, if, having realized both the weight of his debt and the greatness of the forgiveness, he nevertheless began to choke his fellow servant, then what extent of cruelty would he not have reached, if he had not previously been made to understand by such means?"

In despair, the servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. Terror in the face of punishment evoked complete humility in the servant.

Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt. The king saw the servant's despair, which was evoked by the severe sentence and had pity on His servant, forgiving him the whole enormous debt. The same thing takes place with a sinner, when he realizes the whole depth of his fall and the extent of his debt before God.

When we turn to God with repentance and give a sincere promise to correct ourselves, then the Lord is ready at that second to grant us complete remission of sins. Hierarch John Chrysostom remarks concerning this: "...what power prayer has! This debtor did not show either fasting, or non-acquisitiveness - nothing of the kind; however, when he, bereft and devoid of every virtue, only asked his lord, then he succeeded in inclining him to mercy. Let us not weaken in our prayers. Dost thou not have boldness? For this, then, approach, in order to acquire great boldness. He Who wishes to be reconciled with thee is not a man before whom thou must be ashamed and blush; it is God, Who desires more than thou to free thee from sin. Thou dost not desire thy safety so much as He seeks thy salvation".

The Lord's forgiveness is heavenly grace, which, as we have already more than once emphasized, does not act automatically, but only with the indispensable participation of the believer. Of course, the King could, in a unilateral manner, forgive His servant, without his repentance; but He wants his debtor to learn from his magnanimous act and in his own life to act likewise.

But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellow-servants, which owed him an hundred pence. One must understand the words "went out" to mean that he went out from that state of humility and repentance in which he had just been. Plainly speaking, he forgot about God. If he had remembered about God, then he would not have been so inhuman.

And he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest. The sum which the fellow-servant owed him was so insignificant, that it was awkward for the servant himself to name it, and that is why he says, "Pay me that thou owest". Possessed by the desire to receive his own at all costs, the ungrateful servant even resorts to force and chokes his fellow-servant. He acts more sternly than the king himself wanted to act with him; he wants to be judged by one measure, while he himself judges his debtor by another measure. He is happy to be forgiven, but he himself does not want to forgive. He was the object of the King's love and mercy, but he himself does not want to manifest these virtues in his attitude toward others.

How often in life we happen to be witnesses, namely, of such behaviour. I do not only have in mind force as regards debtors. After all, it is also possible "to choke" without using one's hands. When we are angry or remember evil against someone, then we often utter offensive, caustic words, and by this itself we choke our neighbour. We show enmity in our gaze, and frequently, unnoticed by us ourselves, we want to cause a man harm. We besmirch his good name and not infrequently we tell all kinds of false stories about him. By all this, we choke our neighbour.

One may relate the ungrateful servant's words "pay me" to oneself. After all, it often happens in life that we demand that someone who has sinned against us offer us fitting satisfaction. If he has caused us material injury, we want him to reimburse us immediately; and if he has offended us, then we demand that he ask forgiveness without fail. Otherwise, we want him to suffer for his sin and by this means to satisfy our self-love. We completely forget the Saviour's words: With what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again (Matthew 7:2).

And his fellow-servant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. Who does not recall that heartfelt sympathy which we experience when someone asks forgiveness of us? At times we feel awkward; we are ready to forgive and forget everything immediately. But it was not so with the servant: And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt. He was implacable. He was blinded by his pitilessness, not at all realizing that by this he is condemning himself. Such blindness always accompanies one who becomes stern and cruel, who "departs from God", that is, leaves the true path, forgets God's mercy. When we demand immediate satisfaction from one who has sinned against us, thinking that by this we are punishing him, we think that we are putting him in prison, but in reality we are confining ourselves in prison - the prison of alienation from God. Acting thus, we no longer have the right to utter the words of the Lord's Prayer forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

Prayer uttered by a man not desiring to forgive his neighbour is not accepted by God. This is expressed in the words of the Lord: Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there remember that thy brother hath aught against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift (Matthew 5:23-24).

Further on in the parable, we learn that the one who suffered from the ungrateful servant evoked sympathy even from bystanders observing this cruelty: So when his fellow servants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done. Metropolitan Antony (Khrapovitsky), following the Holy Fathers of the Church, writes that here one must understand the fellow servants to be the angels and the saints, our heavenly well-wishers.

Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: shouldst not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow-servant, even as I had pity on thee? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. Usually, the words "delivered...to the tormentors" are understood to mean that God consigns His debtors to eternal torment. But, if for every failure to forgive our neighbour the Lord will consign us to eternal torment, who then can be saved? One must understand these words to mean torment here, in our temporal life: afflictions, misfortunes, illnesses, and so forth. When we sin, usually then we are directed by the desire for enjoyment. Affliction, as something directly opposed to enjoyment, is a fitting redemption of enjoyment. By enduring afflictions, we redeem our sins, as it were, although we are not able to redeem them completely ourselves. Only the sacrificial death of Christ gives complete redemption.

I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: shouldst not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow servant, even as I had pity on thee? The meaning of these words is that by our lack of desire to forgive our neighbour we offend God's loving-kindness and His trust in us.

We expect and receive everything from God: mercies, forgiveness, love, gifts spiritual and earthly; but when people turn to us with a desire to receive the same, we prove to be stern, unbending, unmerciful. We must soften our hearts, while it is still not too late. We must not forget about all the benefactions received by us from God throughout the extent of our whole life. Let us pay attention to the saving meaning of this parable in order to fulfill Christ's commandment: Judge not, and ye shall not be judged; condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned; forgive and ye shall be forgiven (Luke 6:37).