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LEONARD KUYVENHOVEN

FORGIVENESS

WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES
WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

LEADER'S GUIDE

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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

LEADER'S GUIDE



We are grateful to Leonard Kuyvenhoven, pastor of Neland Avenue Christian Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan, for writing this leader's guide.

We also thank Andrew Kuyvenhoven, Leonard's father, and Leonard for writing the student book for this course. Andrew Kuyvenhoven is a retired pastor in the Christian Reformed Church, author of several books, and former editor of *The Banner*. He lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

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CONTENTS

Leading This Course	5
Session 1 A Theology of Forgiveness Wrapped in a Single Story	7
Session 2 Sin and Forgiveness in Biblical History	13
Session 3 Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sin	21
Session 4 The Proclamation of Forgiveness by the Church	27
Session 5 The Practice of Forgiveness in the Church: Self-Discipline and Mutual Discipline	33
Session 6 The Practice of Forgiveness in the Church: Official Discipline	39
Session 7 Forgiveness and Reconciliation.....	45



LEADING THIS COURSE

Forgiveness: What the Bible Teaches, What You Need to Know explores the biblical teaching of forgiveness as it relates to the forgiveness we receive from God and the forgiveness we are called to extend to one another. These are awesome topics. The forgiveness we receive through the work of Christ is the costliest treasure a Christian possesses. And the task of forgiving others is beyond what any of us is capable of unless God himself is working in us.

It is our hope and prayer that the book and leader's guide may be of some assistance in discovering or discovering anew the liberating news of forgiveness from the pages of Scripture. And it is our conviction that forgiveness is God's answer to our deepest need and his prescription for redeeming the world.

FORMAT

This guide uses a Bible study format. Most of the texts we investigate will be found in the book *Forgiveness*. By studying them together more intensely, participants can discover for themselves some of the depths of the biblical teachings and evaluate the ideas presented in the book.

This guide follows the chapters of the book and outlines materials for seven sessions. We recommend that you take the chapters in sequence.

Each session is designed for approximately sixty minutes. To get the most out of your time together, encourage group members to read the chapter that's up for discussion ahead of time. If most of them do this, it will make your discussion more focused and allow for greater participation and depth in answering the discussion questions.

Make sure everyone gets a copy of the book and understands that they should read the first chapter before coming to the initial group meeting. (The first chapter is brief, so this should not be difficult.) To help you lead this study, this leader's guide has the following features:

- **Chapter Summary.** Each session begins with a brief summary of the chapter from the book to keep the main ideas before you and to refresh your memory. It

may be helpful to highlight some of these key points at the beginning of your time together.

- **Session Goals.** Our goals will be clearly outlined. Generally, there will be two or three primary points in the session. Every session will include questions that ask participants to integrate what has been discussed into their own faith journey.
- **Scripture References.** The passages that the group will use in the session are listed. It will be helpful to have Bibles—in the same version—available for participants. Another possibility is to use a computer program to copy Bible passages and distribute them to participants.
- **Session Handout, Leader's Copy.** Each session includes a leader's copy of the session handout group members will be using. Suggestions for leading the sessions and suggested answers to questions are printed in *type that looks like this*. These answers are intended to be directional, not definitive, pointing you and your group in the direction of a response. They may also be helpful in case you were wondering what the question is supposed to be getting at! You'll also find some optional ideas designed to take the lesson in a different direction, should you wish to do so.
- **Session Handout.** At the end of each session is a handout. Photocopy this and distribute copies to the members of your group at the beginning of each session. This eliminates the need to purchase separate booklets for participants.

As you lead this study, be flexible in the way you use these materials. Take extra time on questions that are of special importance or interest to the group. Feel free to abbreviate others or omit them altogether. The study guide does not treat all matters raised in the book, so you may wish to ask generally what questions the chapter raised for people. Our hope is that the questions will facilitate an open discussion and investigation of the awesome grace and difficult work of forgiveness.

A THEOLOGY OF FORGIVENESS WRAPPED IN A SINGLE STORY

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The first chapter of the book uses the parable of the unmerciful servant to explore the forgiveness God grants and the forgiveness God calls us to extend to one another. The parable is a theology of forgiveness wrapped up in a single story.

Scene 1 is a scene of judgment. A horribly bankrupt debtor appears before his king. The scene depicts our status before God and causes us to investigate the enormity of that debt—the nature of sin. Forgiveness comes as the surprise in the story—beyond what the servant asked for or could have expected. The ground for that forgiveness is not found in anything that the servant does but lies instead in the loving heart of the king.

Scene 2 depicts the just-forgiven debtor coming across a fellow servant who owes him money. The amount pales in comparison to the debt that the king had just forgiven. Despite hearing an impassioned plea for mercy that echoes his own plea for mercy before the king, the unforgiving servant fails to show mercy. The servant refuses to forgive his fellow servant.

In scene 3, judgment day is replayed. This time, judgment is carried out against the unmerciful servant because of his failure to show mercy. The king cannot tolerate this appalling disharmony between mercy received and the failure to extend mercy. This unfitting behavior incurs his wrath and judgment.

The parable teaches that we cannot view forgiveness as a matter of bookkeeping or as a legal obligation. Our calling to forgive others must be seen in the context of God forgiving us. For forgiven people, forgiveness is the only fitting response.

SESSION GOALS

- Walk through the parable of the unforgiving servant, understanding ourselves as part of the story Jesus tells.
- Begin exploring the relationship between having been forgiven and extending forgiveness to others.

- Be challenged to forgive others in the context of God having forgiven us.

SCRIPTURE REFERENCES

Matthew 18:21-35

LEADER'S COPY, HANDOUT: SESSION 1 A THEOLOGY OF FORGIVENESS WRAPPED IN A SINGLE STORY

Be sure you have made sufficient copies of the handout so that there is one for each participant. You might also take a moment now to explain the format of this study—the handout takes Scripture references from the book and provides discussion questions that will help the group understand and apply the main ideas from each chapter.

INTRODUCTION

The Bible presents forgiveness as our greatest need. Without forgiveness, life together with God would be impossible. And without forgiveness, significant and sustained relationships with other people would be virtually unattainable. In your own experience, what has driven home the importance of forgiveness?

After reading the above, invite participants to share their responses with the group. As leader, break the ice (and give participants time to think) by first giving your own example. After discussion, have someone read aloud the remainder of the introduction.

During the course of this Bible study we will be looking at what the Bible teaches about the forgiveness that God gives us, the forgiveness we are commanded to extend to each other, and the relationship between the two. When asked about forgiveness, Jesus responds by telling the parable that is the central topic of chapter 1. To get a handle on the question “How many times shall I forgive my brother?” we are supposed to understand ourselves as part of the story that Jesus tells.

Option: Alternate Opening

Here's an alternate way to open your session. Begin by asking participants to list—in order of priority—the top three areas of their lives or relationships where forgiveness plays the biggest role (in my relationship with God, with my spouse, with my kids, with fellow employees, at church, and so on). Have people read at least the number one item on their list and see if there's agreement among the group. Then read through the introduction on the handout.

SCENE 1 (VV. 21-27)

Remember, answers given to the questions below are only suggestions meant to point your group in the direction of an answer. They may also be helpful if you were wondering what the question is supposed to be getting at! Be sure to invite the group to ask their own questions too or to comment on statements found in the book.

1. Why do you think Peter asked his question about forgiveness?

Peter's question is a natural extension of Jesus' teaching in the previous verses, where Jesus had been talking about what to do when someone sins against you. Now the down-to-earth man who used to fish for a living simply wants to know exactly how much forgiveness he's obligated to extend to someone. He wants to put some parameters in place. Of course, we can also wonder if perhaps Peter had someone in mind who had recently offended him—but that's sheer speculation, of course.

2. Put yourself in the position of the servant as he is brought before the king.

- Why is it important to the story that the one to whom the debt is owed is a king?

This is not simply an ordinary debtor/creditor relationship. A subject is dependent on the king and owes everything to him. Furthermore, the king has absolute power over the subject. Also, the king image will suggest God and judgment day to those who hear the parable (see p. 9 of the book).

- How could the servant have gotten this far into debt?

Only by a total disregard for the king's interests.

- As he comes before the king, what might he be feeling and thinking about the king? About himself? About his future?

Imagine having your freedom taken away and then being told that your wife and children would be sold into slavery to repay your debt! This is a terrible, desperate situation. No doubt he is fervently hoping that the king is a merciful man. Perhaps he is afraid of what the king might say and do. Almost certainly he regrets his deep plunge into debt. He can see only a bleak future for himself and for his family.

- The servant pleads for more time so that he can repay the debt himself. How might we do the same thing with God?

We might do the same thing when we decide we'll wait to go to God until we have our life neatly cleaned up. We have plans for restoration, but we fail to understand that only God's help can clean up the mess.

- #### 3. Now put yourself in the servant's place as the king "took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go." What feelings must be going through the servant's mind about himself, about the king, about his future?

As the book says, "The servant came into the scene a captive bound for slavery. He leaves this scene a free man." Imagine his delight, his huge relief, when the king does not merely give him more time to repay his debt but cancels it instead. It is an overwhelming experience! In seconds, he goes from abject hopelessness to complete freedom. We can see him dancing his way out of the palace, blessing the king's graciousness. At least, that's what we'd expect.

SCENE 2 (VV. 28-31)

- #### 1. Why is it significant that the parable describes sins as "debts" that are owed?

Our sins are not simply a matter of bad judgment and mistakes. We owe God, in the sense that we have obligations to him.

- #### 2. Our book says it's important not to belittle the debt that the second servant owes the first. Why? Was this a new insight into this parable for you?

See the comments in the book under scene 2 (pp. 11-12).

3. How would the impact of the story change if scene 1 were omitted?

Read and discuss the first paragraph in the book under "What We Learn from Scene 2" (p. 12).

4. Why are we so upset by the actions in this scene? What is Jesus teaching us about forgiveness?

Like the servants who were "greatly distressed," we are upset because of the total lack of gratitude and mercy in the forgiven servant—it's unjust, outrageous behavior. "The king's fantastically generous grace has left no impression on the servant," says the book (p. 12). The scene sets our forgiveness of others in the context of God's forgiving us.

SCENE 3 (VV. 32-35)

1. Why is the king so upset with the servant? What does it tell you about the king's reasons (and God's reasons) for forgiving in the first place?

It shows an astonishing lack of gratitude, and it makes one wonder whether the great gift of forgiveness left any impression on the servant or changed him in any way. He acts as if it never happened, as if scene 1 had never occurred. It would follow that God's gracious gift of forgiveness was given to change us, to leave its impression on us. As the book notes, "Forgiving others from a grace-touched heart is a fitting response. In fact, it is the only response" (p. 13).

2. Does the king's treatment of the unforgiving servant strike you as too harsh? Why or why not?

While we may wish for a "second chance" for the servant, his punishment is richly deserved. "Since the servant acted as if the forgiveness did not exist, the king did too" (p. 13).

3. Based on the parable, is God's forgiveness of us limited or unlimited? Conditional or unconditional?

The parable seems to say both. The forgiveness in scene 1 is certainly unlimited and unconditional. Yet by scene 3 we are left asking whether there are strings attached. In other words, God's grace does require a fitting response.

4. What's your reaction to Jesus' warning in verse 35?

You may want to discuss the book's comment that "the parable should not be used to make rigid statements about God (for example, God is bound to forgive only those who forgive). . . . But neither should we feel free to take the edge off of Jesus' story" (pp. 13-14).

CLOSING

"God's forgiving grace may be unmerited, but it must not go unnoticed. The divine forgiveness must leave its impression on us; we are to be shaped by it" (p. 13).

Reflect on this quotation together by discussing what sort of impression it ought to leave on us. Where in our own relationships can we reflect the forgiveness that God has so graciously given us?

For your closing prayer, you may want to first invite people to offer sentence prayers of thanks to God for so graciously forgiving us a debt we can never repay. Then invite participants to silently ask God to help them show the same kind of mercy toward a specific individual or relationship in their lives.

Option: Alternate Closing

Here is a contemplative way to close the session. Ask group members to imagine themselves as the servant in scene 1 of the parable. They may close their eyes, if they wish, as you read the following, pausing after each item to reflect silently.

- *You have been brought into the king's presence because you owe him a huge debt, more than you can ever even begin to repay. What are you feeling and thinking?*
- *The king demands that you repay the debt at once or you will be imprisoned for the rest of your life. What are you feeling and thinking?*
- *You fall on your knees and beg the king to have mercy. You promise to pay every cent of the debt you owe. What are you feeling and thinking?*
- *The king looks at you with compassion and announces that your huge debt is cancelled, forgiven. You do not need to pay him back, ever. You are free! What are you feeling and thinking?*

You may wish to move into a time of praise and thanks to God, inviting group members to pray aloud as they wish.

FOR NEXT TIME

Ask participants to read chapter 2, "Sin and Forgiveness in Biblical History." Encourage them to allow plenty of time for the reading, as it is twice as long as chapter 1.

A THEOLOGY OF FORGIVENESS WRAPPED UP IN A SINGLE STORY

Introduction

The Bible presents forgiveness as our greatest need. Without forgiveness, life together with God would be impossible. And without forgiveness, significant and sustained relationships with other people would be virtually unattainable. In your own experience, what has driven home the importance of forgiveness?

During the course of this Bible study we will be looking at what the Bible teaches about the forgiveness that God gives us, the forgiveness we are commanded to extend to each other, and the relationship between the two. When asked about forgiveness, Jesus responds by telling the parable that is the central topic of chapter 1. To get a handle on the question “How many times shall I forgive my brother?” we are supposed to understand ourselves as part of the story that Jesus tells.

Scene 1 (vv. 21-27)

1. Why do you think Peter asked his question about forgiveness?
2. Put yourself in the position of the servant as he is brought before the king.
 - Why is it important to the story that the one to whom the debt is owed is a king?
 - How could the servant have gotten this far into debt?

- As he comes before the king, what might he be feeling and thinking about the king? About himself? About his future?
 - The servant pleads for more time so that he can repay the debt himself. How might we do the same thing with God?
3. Now put yourself in the servant’s place as the king “took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.” What feelings must be going through the servant’s mind about himself, about the king, about his future?

Scene 2 (vv. 28-31)

1. Why is it significant that the parable describes sins as “debts” that are owed?
2. Our book says it’s important not to belittle the debt that the second servant owes the first. Why? Was this a new insight into this parable for you?
3. How would the impact of the story change if scene 1 were omitted?

4. Why are we so upset by the actions in this scene? What is Jesus teaching us about forgiveness?

Scene 3 (vv. 32-35)

1. Why is the king so upset with the servant? What does it tell you about the king's reasons (and God's reasons) for forgiving in the first place?
2. Does the king's treatment of the unforgiving servant strike you as too harsh? Why or why not?
3. Based on the parable, is God's forgiveness of us limited or unlimited? Conditional or unconditional?
4. What's your reaction to Jesus' warning in verse 35?

Closing

"God's forgiving grace may be unmerited, but it must not go unnoticed. The divine forgiveness must leave its impression on us; we are to be shaped by it" (p. 13).

Reflect on this quotation together by discussing what sort of impression it ought to leave on us. Where in our own relationships can we reflect the forgiveness that God has so graciously given us?

ANDREW KUYVENHOVEN AND LEONARD KUYVENHOVEN



FORGIVENESS

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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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CONTENTS

Preface	5
Chapter 1 A Theology of Forgiveness Wrapped in a Single Story	6
Chapter 2 Sin and Forgiveness in Biblical History	16
Chapter 3 Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sin	34
Chapter 4 The Proclamation of Forgiveness by the Church	50
Chapter 5 The Practice of Forgiveness in the Church: Self-Discipline and Mutual Discipline	64
Chapter 6 The Practice of Forgiveness in the Church: Official Discipline ..	74
Chapter 7 Forgiveness and Reconciliation	87
Works Cited	103



PREFACE

In this book we summarize the biblical teaching about forgiveness. We relate how God has dealt with human sins and how we must deal with those who have sinned against us.

In the last twenty-five years many books and essays have been written on the topic of forgiveness. Most of these writings describe the healing benefits of forgiveness in interpersonal relationships. Lewis B. Smedes thought that his book *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve* (Word, 1984) set off this avalanche. He reflects on that in *My God and I* (Eerdmans, 2003), published after his death. Maybe he was right.

Our present book limits itself to “What the Bible Teaches” about forgiveness. The Bible also knows the freedom and healing that God’s forgiveness of our sins brings to the human spirit (see, for example, Ps. 32, 51). But the “psychology” of the healing effects of forgiveness in those who were hurt and in the souls of the perpetrators lies beyond the scope of this book.

Forgiveness is people’s greatest need (but many don’t know their real needs!), and it is an overwhelming gift, inseparable from the work of Jesus Christ. The study of forgiveness and the job of formulating our findings gave us much joy. We hope the book will be helpful for many.

—Andrew Kuyvenhoven and Leonard Kuyvenhoven



Act of Forgiveness

—Artist Unknown (Italian), Palazzo Della Ragione, Padua

A THEOLOGY OF FORGIVENESS WRAPPED IN A SINGLE STORY

Forgiveness stands at the heart of the Christian faith. Without it, a relationship with God is impossible for you and for me. And our relationships with other people must also be glued with forgiveness, time and time again. Especially such an intimate relationship as marriage cannot endure if the partners are unwilling to forgive.

At a very early age our children know why Christ died on the cross. They will tell you that Jesus died “to forgive our sins.” They learn it early because it is really true that accomplishing forgiveness was the focal point of Jesus’ life and especially of his death. As far as we are concerned, God’s forgiveness means life for us, and what we do with that forgiveness is a matter of life or death.

We have many questions about forgiveness precisely because it is such a central truth and everybody’s biggest need. Such questions are nothing new. Jesus’ disciples, who experienced his gracious and challenging words firsthand, also had questions about forgiveness:

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?”

—Matthew 18:21

Peter’s question is revealing. Peter had been around Jesus long enough to know that forgiveness was central to who Jesus was and, therefore, vital in the life of his disciples.

Peter must have sensed that forgiveness played a greater role in Jesus’ teaching than in that of his contemporaries, who taught that you had to forgive someone three times. After the third strike, the offender was out—no more forgiveness was required. Peter recognized that the greater emphasis on forgiveness in Jesus’ teaching probably meant an expanded duty to forgive. Now Peter wants the new parameters spelled out. It’s a personal question for Peter, “Lord, how many times shall *I* forgive . . . up to seven times?”

Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”

—Matthew 18:22¹

Jesus’ answer, along with the parable he tells to explain his answer, announces a whole new way of thinking about forgiveness. The number Jesus uses is significant. In Genesis 4:24 a man named Lamech uses the number seventy-seven as a boastful announcement of vengeance. Lamech brags to his wives:

I have killed a man for wounding me,
a young man for injuring me.
If Cain is avenged seven times²
then Lamech seventy-seven times.

In Lamech's mouth, the number seventy-seven is used as a symbol of *unlimited* vengeance. If he is sinned against, Lamech threatens to take matters into his own hands (rather than leaving it to God) and pay back the sinner seventy-seven times. Christ takes that symbolic number and applies it to forgiveness instead of to vengeance. For Christ (and henceforth for his followers!) the number seventy-seven becomes a symbol of unlimited forgiveness. To answer Peter's question, Jesus gives no "upper limit" on forgiveness. Forgiveness is not a matter of legal obligation and record-keeping. Forgiveness is a way of life that is in touch with grace that has been received.

The Parable

Jesus then tells a parable (Matt. 18:23-35) to illustrate the new dimensions of forgiveness for his followers. It is critical to understand the role of this parable in Jesus' teaching on forgiveness. At other times and in other places in the gospels, Jesus has a variety of things to say about forgiveness. All are important and must be considered. This parable, however, is devoted to illustrating the new dimensions of forgiveness for the followers of Christ. It is a theology of forgiveness wrapped up in a single story.

"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

"The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'

"But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.

“When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’

“In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.”

The parable has three distinct scenes. In scene 1, on the day of reckoning a hopelessly bankrupt debtor comes before the king and is forgiven his astronomical debt. In scene 2, the now-forgiven debtor refuses to forgive a much smaller debt owed him by a fellow servant of the king. In the final scene, the unforgiving servant reappears before the king. Angry that the one who has received so much forgiveness could not be forgiving, the king has the unforgiving servant thrown in prison.

We need to understand the progression of these three scenes if we want to grasp the connection between receiving forgiveness and our duty to pass it on to others.

Scene 1—The Day of Reckoning

The parable opens with a king who is “settling accounts” with his servants. This imagery frequently occurs in Jesus’ parables. The king is God the Father. Settling accounts means that judgment day has arrived. Servants are all accountable to the king, and the time will come when all will appear before his throne. In most of these accounting stories, servants are either rewarded for exemplary stewardship, or they are punished for misusing or neglecting what has been given to them.

“As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him” [the Greek calls the man a “debtor”] (v. 24).

Notice that the man doesn’t show up on his own—he is “brought.” This servant is so heavily in debt he is no longer a free man. Because of his debt, the man’s freedom has been taken away. And his debt is enormous. To understand the new dimension of forgiveness that Jesus is teaching, we must pay attention to the amount of the debt.

The Debt: Ten Thousand Talents

Sometimes Bible translators and commentators seek to convey the meaning of the debt by supplying an equivalent in present day dollars, but that may actually miss the point. The word translated “ten thousand” is the Greek word

murios. The word sometimes means “numberless” in the sense of something beyond counting. We get the English word *myriad* from this word. So when the Bible speaks of myriads of angels, it means there are so many that you couldn’t possibly count them all. As a number, *murios* means ten thousand—which in Jesus’ time was the highest multiplier used in arithmetic.

A talent is neither a number nor an amount, but actually a measure of weight—the largest measure of weight in use among the Jews for commerce.³ Its value would differ, of course, according to what was being weighed. A talent of gold would be enormously valuable.



The debt is out of control, way beyond what we could possibly expect to repay.



When Jesus says “ten thousand talents,” he is using the largest measure of weight multiplied by the largest multiplier. Think of it this way—sometimes children try to outdo each other by coming up with bigger and bigger numbers. “I love mom a hundred!” says one. “I love her a million!” says the other. Then one of the older children comes up with the ultimate comeback: “Well, I love her *infinity!*” They use the biggest multiplier at their disposal. In this parable, Jesus uses the largest amount times the largest weight. It expresses an infinite debt, one that is beyond calculation.⁴

Of course the servant cannot pay. So the king orders that the servant, his family, and his possessions are to be sold. This will not cover the debt, but what else can the king do? At least this way he can recoup something, get a fraction of a penny back on each dollar that is owed, as we would say. So far, the parable takes the course we might have expected. On the day of judgment, servants who have misused or neglected what was given them can expect punishment.

The servant falls on his knees and says, “Be patient with me, and I will pay back everything.” This is ridiculous! Where is the servant going to come up with the amount he owes? What’s he going to do, take out a second mortgage? Get a job on the side? How exactly do you raise enough money to pay off an infinite debt?

But now the parable holds a great surprise: forgiveness! Amazingly, the bankrupt servant’s plea for mercy touches the heart of the king. The king does something radical, something far better than what was requested. The bankrupt servant asked for time, but the king gives him forgiveness: the debt is canceled! And that forgiveness sets the servant free. The servant came into this scene a captive bound for slavery. He leaves this scene a free man. All this because the king is forgiving.

What We Learn from Scene 1

This parable hits us with a startling truth: we all come before the king with an astronomical debt. The debt is out of control, way beyond what we could possibly expect to repay. This is our position before God. It is a shocking and uncomfortable spiritual truth. We would rather believe that our debt is manageable or that, given either more time or greater effort, we could get it under control. But that's simply not in touch with the reality of our debt.

Any discussion of forgiveness must look at that debt—the debt of sin. As one author has put it, “The sober truth is that without full disclosure on sin, the gospel of grace becomes impertinent, unnecessary, and finally uninteresting.”⁵

This scene also illustrates the surprising nature of forgiveness. The servant receives so much more than he deserved, more than he asked for, and ultimately more than he understood. The servant's plan for restoration would not have worked—he could not possibly have come up with what he owed. Only the king was able to give the servant what he truly needed: not a payment plan, but a clean slate; not help, but rescue; not another chance, but a new life.

We see this everywhere in the Bible. Forgiveness addresses our greatest need; it is the only thing that can truly set us free.

What prompted the king to forgive the debt? It certainly was not wrested from him. It was not purchased or bargained from him. Forgiveness is the surprise of the story. No reasons can be found except those hidden in the heart of the king. The servant has discovered that this king is “forgiving, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love” (Neh. 9:17).

Scene 2—Forgiven and . . . Unforgiving?

Fresh from this wonderful experience of forgiveness, the servant leaves the king's throne room and immediately finds a fellow servant of the king who owed him money: a hundred denarii.

The Debt: A Hundred Denarii

The *NIV Study Bible*, along with many commentators, downplays the amount of this debt, calling it “just a few dollars.” Actually, a denarius was the typical wage-earner's pay for a day's work. So a hundred denarii was roughly four months' wages. Few of us would call four months' wages “just a few dollars,” nor would we casually brush off such a debt and call it trivial. This is not an insignificant amount.

The parable does *not* teach that the debts that we (fellow servants of the king) owe to each other are trifling. The debts we owe one another are real. Anyone who has been betrayed by a spouse or abused by a parent can testify to the awful reality of such debts. That is why it is important not to belittle the debt that the

second servant owes the first. Rather, the parable teaches that our debts pale in significance compared to the gift of mercy we have received from the king.⁶

Scene 2 replays part of scene 1. Just as the original debtor begged for mercy before the king, now his fellow servant pleads for mercy, using almost the exact same words. But the unforgiving servant is morally deaf. He does not hear his own words being played back to him. He is unmoved. Neither the grace he has just received nor his fellow servant's plea for mercy touches his heart. He demands to be paid back every penny he is owed. Then he has his fellow servant thrown in prison until the whole debt is paid back.

What We Learn from Scene 2

If scene 2 stood by itself, the servant's actions would not seem so bad. He is merely demanding that a debt owed to him be repaid. We might criticize the servant for being a bit harsh in his debt collection technique, but after all, he is only asking for what he has coming to him. When we are sinned against, the sinner owes us. The equilibrium of our lives has been disturbed. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with demanding that things be put right again.

However, when scene 2 is placed in the context of the king's great act of forgiveness, the servant's unforgiving actions become terribly unfitting. The king's fantastically generous grace has left no impression on the servant. Receiving grace has not made him gracious. Forgiveness has not made him forgiving. Having received so much mercy has not made him merciful. It is this lack of correspondence, this total lack of harmony that makes the servant's actions in scene 2 completely unacceptable.

Scene 2 focuses our attention on forgiving one another—the question that Peter initially raised. Christ answers Peter's question by placing the issue of forgiveness between people in the context of the divine forgiveness we have received. Our actions, whether forgiving or unforgiving, are all placed in the context of that divine forgiveness.

Scene 3—The Day of Reckoning Revisited

The day of judgment is replayed in the final scene. Once again, the servant appears before the king, but this time there is a drastically different conclusion. Instead of acquittal, there is conviction and imprisonment.

What gets the servant this harsh sentence? It is his failure to live in harmony with the grace he received. The king will not tolerate this lack of a fitting response. Since the servant has acted as if the forgiveness did not exist, the king does too! The debt now must be paid. And since it's an infinite amount, the time to repay is also infinite.

Finally, Jesus' parable brings us as followers of Christ directly into its focus: "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (v. 35).

What We Learn from Scene 3

Recall that the parable was told in answer to Peter's question "Lord, how many times shall I forgive . . . up to seven times?" Peter believes he has captured the essence of Jesus' teaching by increasing the number of times we are obligated to forgive. But Jesus' answer shows that forgiveness is not a matter of keeping score. Because they frame the issue in terms of legal obligation, neither the three times that the Pharisees prescribed nor the seven times that Peter suggested can get at our obligation to forgive. Forgiveness is not a matter of record-keeping; it is a matter of the heart. That's why Jesus concludes with the words "from your heart" when he comments on the parable. Those who have been set free from the crushing burden of the debt of sin through the lavish mercy of the king have been granted new life. How can that not touch their hearts? Forgiving others from a grace-touched heart is a fitting response. In fact, it is the *only* fitting response.

Jesus' parable began with an awesome proclamation of grace. The infinite debt we owe to God the King is freely and fully pardoned. This is the cornerstone of our faith and the rock upon which the church stands. It's a message we never tire of preaching.

But the parable concludes with a solemn warning. God's forgiving grace may be unmerited, but it must not go unnoticed. The divine forgiveness must leave its impression on us; we are to be shaped by it. To act as if it never happened puts into question whether it happened. The church must preach this part of the message too.

The parable raises the question of the relationship between divine and human forgiveness. Can divine forgiveness be revoked? Is it conditional on our forgiving others? We will take up these questions throughout the remaining chapters in the book. In Scripture, the call to forgive one another is often accompanied either by a threat of punishment or with the fundamental reason of gratitude and imitation of divine love. For purposes of the parable, we need to recall that the story of the unforgiving servant functions as exhortation—Christ is insisting that his disciples practice forgiveness. The parable should not be read to make rigid statements about God (for example, God is bound to forgive only those who forgive). The purpose for telling a parable is always important in its interpretation.

But neither should we feel free to take the edge off of Jesus' story. If the parable radiates heat we should consider its source. The dire warning about the need

to forgive one another comes to us from the One who is on his way to the cross to secure that forgiveness for us. It will cost him his life. And it is his deepest desire that the lavish and surprising mercy we receive through his sacrifice will touch our hearts—and make us forgiving people.

Notes

1. Or: seventy times seven (490). The Greek is capable of either interpretation. The reason the NIV and more modern translations have opted for seventy-seven is because of the parallel in the Greek translation of Genesis 4:24. In either case, the point is the same: forgiveness in God's kingdom goes far beyond all calculation. It's not a matter of counting.
2. A few verses earlier God had said, "If anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over" (Gen. 4:15).
3. It varied at different times and the exact weight is not known for sure—somewhere between 58-83 pounds.
4. It's probably worth noting that the Jewish historian Josephus, a contemporary of Jesus, reports that the taxes collected for all of Palestine were about 8,000 talents. So this servant's debt is greater than the entire national tax revenue!
5. Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, page 199.
6. One commentator has calculated that the ratio between the debts is 600,000 to 1. (Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, page 27.)