

The parable of the unforgiving servant. Matt. 17. 24a; 18. 21-19. 1. Bangalore, India. 29 January 2007.

Please keep your Bibles open at the passage.

The word 'Then' with which Matt. 18. 21 begins, alerts us to the fact that what follows is directly connected to what goes before. This was the last recorded event at Capernaum, 19. 1. The story begins properly in Matt. 17. 24 when Jesus and Peter returned to Capernaum – this was now known as His 'own city – home town', Matt. 9. 1. That is, the section occupies from Matt. 17. 24 to 19. 1. The theme and subject of the section is that of offences, causes of stumbling. I think we can assume He was staying at Peter's house - see Matt. 8. 5 (He entered Capernaum), v. 14 (He came into Peter's house). This would explain why the collectors of the tax asked Peter. They were Peter's fellow-townsmen, and doubtless knew him well – and they came to Peter as Jesus' host and as the acknowledged spokesman for the twelve – note that, when speaking to Peter, they referred to Jesus as 'your' Master/Teacher – plural, 17. 24.

17. 24. This tax differs from the tribute of verse 25; and from that to which the disciples of Pharisees and the Herodians referred in chapter 22, 'Tell us therefore, What do you think? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?', 22. 17. This was not the tax paid to Romans, but the ½ shekel, the atonement money, which was paid by each Israelite as a ransom for his soul, Exod. 30. In our Lord's day, the proceeds were used to defray the expenses of temple – as originally they had been used to defray the expenses of tabernacle.

There was a whole rabbinical set of rules concerning the collection of the tax, which says, 'they asked every man for the half shekel quietly ... on the 15th [of the month Adar – February/March], money-changers took up their posts in every state From him who gave they received, from him who gave not they used no compulsion'.

As far as the collectors knew, it was possible that Jesus might have claimed exemption from the tax as a recognized teacher, and so they wanted to know whether or not He would be paying. It is possible that they deliberately framed the question - 'Does your master not...?', so as to invite answer of 'yes, of course'.

V. 25. Well, they got their 'Yes' – it was probably the shortest sentence Peter ever said. He confirmed that the Teacher did indeed pay. Peter clearly saw no need to bother the Master over such a trivial and obvious issue and, in any case, as we will see, his mind was on, what to him and the other apostles, was a far more pressing and important issue! – which would soon come to light.

And so, altogether in character, Peter impulsively responded 'yes'. I guess that there may even have been an element of faith in his answer – there might not have been any money in the bag – hence the procedure adopted by our Lord in verse 27.

Well, our Lord witnessed encounter, and knew the drift of conversation. But He was too much of a gentleman to correct and embarrass Peter publicly outside. But once in the house, Jesus 'prevented' = anticipated Peter. Jesus spoke first. Whenever the conversational ball stopped bouncing, Peter would be sure to pick it up. You always needed to be quick to get in before Peter. But the more so today – he was simply bursting to raise/broach the burning issue of 18.1 – which had exercised the minds of all the apostles on the road to Capernaum. Mark = 'He came to Capernaum: and being in the house He asked them, What was it that ye disputed among yourselves on the way? But they held their peace: for on the way they had disputed among themselves, who should be the greatest', Mark 9. 33-34. Sadly, they were not discussing what the Lord Jesus meant by His reference to His forthcoming betrayal and death!, Matt. 17. 22-23.

Ask about 'custom - referring to toll, duties on goods, whether import or export, and 'tribute' - referring to poll tax, tax on persons, follow census. I.e. both indirect & direct taxation. 'Of own sons (not children, KJV) – or of strangers?'

V. 26. When Peter answered, of strangers', the Lord said, 'then' – 'so then', 'surely then', 'sons free' – not simply time note of 18. 21. The mention of 'sons' is a clear reference to Himself as Son of God. Temple was His Father's house – 'it is written, My house called house of prayer', 21. 13 (cleansed). Peter not grasped full meaning of own confession at C.P., 'Thou art the Christ, Son of the living God', 16. 16. Nor thought through implications or of what heard endorsed/confirmed on the Mount of Transfiguration, 'This is My beloved Son', 17.5. Put foot in.

V. 27. 'But lest we should offend them'. In all probability smile when left Galilee in Matt. 15. 12, disciples = 'Don't you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?' – not what enter man's mouth defiles, but comes out. But Lord saw as necessary to avoid any possible misunderstanding. The Jews lacked key which Peter held. Jesus had deliberately not proclaimed Himself openly as Son of God. Following both Peter's confession and the disciples' experience on the Mount of Transfiguration, He had strictly charged them that they 'tell no man', 16. 20 (Jesus the Christ); 17. 9 (vision).

Without any explanation, the Jews couldn't be blamed if they walked away with the impression that the Lord Jesus despised the temple – that He would have gladly cut off the chief financial support for the house of God, and that He was totally indifferent to the honour of Him who dwelt there. Remember that there were rumours circulating to the effect that He had said He would destroy the temple and build another in three days.

And our Lord was determined to avoid unnecessary offence. So sent obtain necessary payment from the local 'bank'! - the sea shore! – to get the money! Find 'piece of money' = shekel, exactly sum needed.²

Spoke of giving for 'Me and you', not 'for 'us'. Distinguish self from Peter because reason paid was different. It was not for Him, who had come to give His life (soul) a ransom for many, Matt. 20. 28, to pay any ransom for His own soul, Exod. 30. 12 LXX. Though He submitted to the tax, it wasn't on the same ground as Peter. He paid, though, as Son, He was exempt - Peter paid because he was liable. In the Lord's case, for Him to pay was a case of consideration for others – for Peter to pay was a case of obligation to the law of God.

Remember that 'Lest we offend them'.

18. 1. 'In that hour', literally. As I said, according to Mark, they were fired only with selfish ambition and disputed about their own greatness on the way to Capernaum. Jesus had noted the dispute, but had said nothing. Now they wasted no time.

V. 2. He choose young child as means of instruction, stood at side so not feel exposed, Luke 9. 47, then embrace/enfold in arms, Mark 9. 36. The child was held up as a model, not of innocence or purity, but of humility and unconcern for social status. A young child - humble, unassuming, free from rivalry, envy, self-seeking. With such humility came childlike trust – and so Jesus warns them that unless they became as a child, not enter kingdom (no wise = double negative) – let alone be great there, v. 3.

V. 6 – steer teaching to 'whoever offend one of these little ones which believe'. And says would be better for man who puts a stone in the path of another believer have a stone hung around his neck and 'drown far out in open sea'. Large, upper millstone, kind pulled by ox, do nothing for breast-stroke. The size and weight of the stone would prevent any chance of the body rising again to the surface and being buried by friends - a consideration which – to His contemporaries – only served to increase the horror of such a death. Punishment actually inflicted by Augustus – not a man to cross or upset!

Vv. 8-9. Repeat of Matt. 5. 29-30, which in context lust and 7th commandment, and where eye therefore mentioned first (cf David in 2 Sam. 11). Now speaks of removing all occasions of 'offence' (stumbling) to self - no matter how great the cost. To be merciless and unsparing – cut off and gouge out. Cf 'When Hezekiah saw that Sennacherib was come, and that he was purposed to fight against Jerusalem, he took counsel with his princes and his mighty men to stop the waters of the fountains which were outside the city: and they helped him. So there was gathered much people together, who stopped all the fountains, and the brook that ran through the midst of the land, saying, Why should the king of Assyria come, and find much water?', 2 Chron.32. 2-4. It makes sense to cut off our enemy's supplies! Not allow things know lead to sin. I.e. Spoke of causing offences (occasions of stumbling) to (i) unbelievers, ch.17. 27, (ii) believers, 18. 6, and (iii) oneself, vv. 8-9. That is, not offend 'them', 'these', 'thee', Matt. 17. 27; 18. 6, 8.

In **vv. 15-20** outline procedure to follow if happen be offended/injured party. 'If your brother sin against you'. Ie turn from warning against causing offence to give instruction/counsel as to how to react/respond/behave if at receiving end.

He tells that first stage is to reprove/convict offender of fault alone, 17. 25. What not do is to harbour a grudge, not to nurse grievance, not to let feelings of bitterness and resentment build up. Don't brood on the injury done, go and sort it out – teaching wholly consistent with the law of Moses, 'You shall not hate your brother in your heart: you shall in any wise rebuke your neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him. You shall not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people', Lev. 19. 17, 18. If refuse hear, take on or two others was also in accordance with law, 'One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sins: at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established', Deut. 19. 15. Lord apply teaching to church.

'If refuse hear even the church', v.17 = because no higher appeal - the ultimate authority – therefore not go courts before unbeliever, 1 Cor. 6. The Lord, without for one moment endorsing the Jews' treatment of gentiles and tax collectors, acknowledges the fact, and uses it as an illustration. 'As a tax-collector' – the writer of the gospel could be expected to remember that bit – he knew its meaning all too well! Matt. 9. 9.

Fine so far, but ... **v. 21.** 'Peter was clearly concerned that Jesus had left unanswered the important question of how many times he was meant to forgive? The word translated 'trespass', v. 15 = 'sin', v. 21. I take it from the two

requests which lie at the heart of the Lord's story – 'have patience', vv. 26, 29 – that both He and Peter assumed throughout the repentance of the offending party. This would be consistent with our Lord's later teaching in Luke 17 – about offences committed in a single day - 'if your brother trespass against you, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. And if he trespass against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to you, saying, I repent, forgive him', Luke 17. 4. What if my brother kick me and apologise – and then again ... how many times? - and what about my poor shin!

It is important to note that Peter erred on generous side – his offer went far beyond oral teaching of the Jewish Rabbis. Their standard was clear – you are required to forgive only three times. For example, Rabbi Jose ben Jahuda said, 'If a man commit an offence, once they forgive him, a second time they forgive him, a third time they forgive him, the fourth time they do not forgive him, for it is said, For three transgressions and for four I will not turn away the punishment thereof', Amos x8 in chs 1-2; complete misunderstanding – not most intelligent interpretation – really signify indefinite number - numerous. Rabbi Jose ben Hanina said, 'He who begs forgiveness from his neighbour must not do so more than three times'. But Peter had been with Lord too long to expect get away with three times. So opens bidding by doubling the Rabbis standard, add one for good measure and put on table. Seven times then hit him.

V. 22. Lord not having any of it. 'Seven times? Try 490'. Not mean Peter to go and buy self a notepad and keep count until 487.488, 489, 490 – and wham! Clearly meant times without number. Almost certainly had in mind words of pre-flood Lamech, descendant of Cain [seventh including Adam – as Enoch was seventh including Adam through Seth], first bigamist, arrogant and blasphemous, boast to wives, 'If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech 70 x seven-fold', Gen.4. 24 (LXX = Matt.18. 22). Refers to word of God, 'whosever slays Cain, vengeance be taken on him 7-fold', Gen.4. 15. That is, 'if God warn of 7-fold vengeance on killer of Cain), I hereby serve notice that I will guarantee 70x7-fold retribution on anyone dare lift a hand against me'. Lord sets over against the natural man's craving for 70x7-fold vengeance and revenge, the spiritual mans duty of 70x7-fold forgiveness.

V. 23. While Peter no doubt still aghast, trying absorb/cope with bombshell – the Lord's demand for unlimited forgiveness – and implications for his poor shin! – then Jesus told the parable. 'Therefore' – its purpose was to illustrate the point. Suppose, He asks, you comply with what to you is an outrageous demand, what do you think the offences committed against you amount to when compared with all that has been forgiven you?³

V. 24. One was 'brought forward to him' – he did not 'go' - cntr. 'went out', vv.28, 30 – and hardly surprising – for he owed an immense, an incredible amount. '10,000 talents', impossible imagine; no point try express in present day value. No way be private debt which one man owe another. Was amount passed between empires and kingdoms. For example, was the sum which Darius III offered Alexander the Great to keep out of Asia – and the sum which, in a peace agreement signed in 201 BC, Hannibal of Carthage had to pay the Romans, in 50 annual instalments.⁴ The fine imposed at Peace of Apamea in 188 BC on Antiochus the Great by Rome after he was defeated was 15,000 talents over 12 years – burnt fingers invade Egypt; Romans cheated by using elephants. The combined annual tribute for Judea, Idumea, Samaria, Galilee and Perea was 800 talents, Jos. Ant. 17.11,4. Peter's mouth must dropped open at mention of such a colossal sum.

1 talent = 6000 denarii; 'When Jesus then lifted up his eyes, and saw a great company come unto him, he said to Philip, Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat? And this he said to prove him: for he himself knew what he would do. Philip answered him, Two hundred denarii of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may take a little', John 6. 5-7; ie 'where shall we buy?', Philip = 'never mind where buy, with what?' Assume 200 denarii was enough for 5,000 men {because not enough for men plus women and children} – 10,000 talents was enough to provide meal for about 1,500 million people - ie would pay for meal for almost a quarter world's population today [which = 6.5 billion].

V. 25. 'As he couldn't pay' – surprise, surprise – utterly bankrupt – command sell family and possessions in accord both Roman and Jewish law, Exod. 22. 3; 2 Kings 4. 1.⁵ Such a debt couldn't possibly be covered by selling a single family into slavery; the very top price paid for a slave was about one talent – and far more common it would have been one-tenth of that – or less.

V. 26. 'Worshipped' = prostrated self before. Begged for time, 'bear with me, defer anger, and 'I will pay you all' – word 'all' = emphatic; not in Greek of v.29. Tongue very much in cheek. Went without saying that wasn't going to get very good reference for another position/job. But based on parable of workers in vineyard in chapter 20, and pay of common soldier (225 denarii in year⁶), if assume earn a denarius a day and work every Sabbath and have no holidays, would be able pay off entire debt in only 164,383 years, 6 months, 25 days. Whole thing was absurd – it was a debt no man could ever hope to pay. Whole thing was ludicrous – no doubt Peter roared with laughter!

V. 27. But was answered superabundantly above all ask or think, Eph 3. 20. He besought the king only to show him patience, v. 26, but the king showed him compassion, gave him his freedom, and extended him forgiveness, v. 27. 'What a nice story', Peter thought – 'But', v. 28!

V. 28. The same servant 'found' one of his fellow-servants – it seems sought out – another servant who owed him '100 denarii'. It is important to note that this wasn't an insignificant/trivial amount – wasn't peanuts. To the disciples it was a considerable sum, John 6. 7. After all, it amounted to over three months earnings for labourer. Jesus could have chosen a much smaller amount if He had wished. Eg ten denarii – or only one! Indeed, He could have gone much smaller – there were 128 'mites' (lepta) in a single denarius! But our Lord chose to speak of a small fortune. The point He was making is that, in selves, offences between brethren are significant. They can be very hurtful – 'Peter, I accept that kicks to your shin are no light matter'. They sink into insignificance only when measured against your sins against God. As John Chrysostom (4th century church father) put it, 'though you forgive seventy times seven, though you continually pardon your neighbour, this is as a drop of water to an limitless sea'. But man in story seized his fellow-servant and began to throttle him – to 'choke' him; the word used of swine at Gadara who were 'choked' in the sea, Mark 5. 13.

V. 29. The important thing to note is that second servant pleaded for patience in words almost identical to those of first servant. Surely, the very words should have served to remind him of his own pardon.

V. 30. 'But he would not'. The very servant who has just gone out - with memory of the king's compassion and forgiveness fresh in his mind, v. 28 – who could be expected of all men to grant an immediate and full pardon to his fellow-servant – isn't prepared to grant him even an extension of time for payment to be made – which could have been done over a relatively short period. Not that what he did was legally or technically wrong – he was within his 'rights' – the money was owed – the law was on his side and any magistrate would have ruled in his favour. Yes, but what he did was wrong – it was wrong because he had been forgiven so much more. It was a right which was a wrong! I have no doubt that Jesus meant to shock and disgust the fisherman from Capernaum – to rouse his anger – before He thrust home the point and said, in effect, 'you are the man'. And just as the prophet Nathan made King David angry with his story about the little lamb in 2 Sam. 12, so I imagine Peter has long since stopped laughing – now he is mad!

V. 31. The other servants were 'grieved exceedingly', Jesus said – were greatly distressed with the actions of this obnoxious character. And went and 'told' to their lord – informed him, put him fully in the picture; only 'expound to us this parable', 13. 36 (oldest MSS).

V. 32. The king was not amused! 'calling him forward'. 'You wicked servant' – 'You miserable little man'. He was prepared to overlook his incompetence or dishonesty – and that huge debt – 'all that debt', emphatic by position – but not his heartlessness and cruelty.

V. 33. 'Was it not your duty to have mercy/pity on your fellow-servant, as I (emphatic) also had mercy/pity on you?'

V. 34. In his anger, the king had the wretch cast into prison and his life made as miserable and bitter as possible.

V. 35. 'So also shall my heavenly Father do to you'. Not that God is in the business of canceling the forgiveness of His children – in the Lord Jesus we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins, Eph. 1. 7. But we mustn't ignore the Lord's point about the way in which God deals with unforgiving men. For those who by trait of character – by persistent habit and constant practice – refuse to forgive others, demonstrate that they are themselves total strangers to divine forgiveness. Whatever they may claim, they know nothing of God's forgiveness. 'From your heart', He said – sincerely, not in word only – so as not to keep count. Such forgiveness would never know if it reached 490 times. The Lord wants us to know that our forgiveness by God imposes serious obligations on us. Having sought and accepted God's forgiveness, we have implicitly pledged ourselves to show the same to others. By accepting God's forgiveness, I have bound myself to forgive all who wrong me and ask my forgiveness. To withhold my forgiveness from others is not an option open to me.

Leave last word to Paul, 'Be kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you', Eph. 4. 31-32. Lord, help me to live – and forgive – as one who has been forgiven.⁷

Footnote

¹ 'Of whom ... the kings of the earth' - in contrast perhaps to the One known as 'the King of Heaven', Dan. 4. 37, who features throughout the following section; see 'kingdom of heaven' three times (Matt. 18. 3, 4, 23); 'your Father in heaven', v. 14, 'My heavenly Father', v. 35 – and note also the parable about 'a king', v. 23 – obviously representing God.

² 'A shekel is equal to four Drachmae', Jos. Ant. III, VIII, 2.

³ 'Take account of his servants' = his slaves. But we should be careful not to misunderstand the use of the word. Greek writers (Herodotus and Xenophon) applied the term 'slave' to important officers of state. Our Lord pictures some great oriental potentate, with numerous high officials, who must render him an account of the revenues they received.

⁴ Also – 'Hannibal tried to repeat his Cannae tactics, but Scipio had better cavalry than the unfortunate consuls fourteen years before. Hannibal's encircling movement failed, and the Carthaginians were defeated. Hannibal escaped to Carthage, where he advised negotiations. In 201, peace was signed. Rome asked an enormous prize: it demanded the Carthaginian fleet, recognition of the Roman conquests in Iberia, and an indemnity of no less than 10,000 talents, to be paid in fifty annual instalments' - <http://www.livius.org/ha-hd/hannibal/hannibal.html>.

⁵ Although Jewish was mitigated by release at year of jubilee.

⁶ Tacitus. Annales. i. 17; compare Pliny 33. 3.

⁷ **Fuller and tidier notes can be accessed at http://www.preciousseed.org/article_detail.cfm?articleID=2726 and http://www.preciousseed.org/article_detail.cfm?articleID=2755.**