

How Can We Forgive?¹

I'd like to begin by pointing your attention to two things about this little story that I've missed in the past. First, ten thousand talents is an immense amount of money. A lot of us have pretty big credit card balances and car loans. No comparison. Ten thousand talents is like the national debt of a fair sized country. Ten thousand talents would be like putting the construction of the Interstate Highway system on your Master Card. We're talking about an unimaginable debt that no individual could ever run up nor pay off.

By contrast, the one hundred denarii amount owed by the other slave is the change that slips between the cushions on the couch, which you vacuum up together with the lint and cookie crumbs because you don't want to bother walking upstairs to put it in the penny jar.

So keep in mind the order of magnitude of these two money amounts—one being huge, the other insignificant.

The second thing you may have missed is the fact that this story is comparable to the Kingdom of God. Jesus is forever trying to awaken us to what the Kingdom of God is all about. The Kingdom is what it's going to be like when God moves into his rightful place reigning over all creation and is able to implement his dream and vision for us and everything he has

¹Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on September 14, 2008 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA.

created. When God's running the show, which is more true already than you realize, this kind of stuff happens.

So the kingdom of God is like a king who wished to settle accounts and so on. When God reigns you and I get released from an incalculable debt as was this lucky servant. The Kingdom of God reminds us that we too have been released from an obligation or a sin dilemma from which we could never free ourselves. The Kingdom is also like what happens when we are so unaware or ungrateful that the immense goodness which has been given to us can't flow through us into everyday life and everyday debts. The Kingdom may actually result in our treating people as if nothing has happened.

Let me illustrate. One of my church members became immensely wealthy and moved to Florida. At length, his daughter wanted me to conduct her wedding. I agreed and set to work planning my 2½ day quick trip to Florida. I got a good deal on an airline ticket. My in-laws had a home near the sight of the celebration, so lodging was free. I borrowed their car and commuted back and forth from the festivities. Do you get the picture of me doing the sensible, cheap Calvinistic thing? It's a wonder I didn't show up at the black tie reception with a brown bag and sip drink.

Anyway, when I proudly presented my modest expenses to the bride's family they expressed disappointment. "Doug, we reserved a condo for two on the beach. We thought you'd want to make this into a vacation. That's what all the bridesmaids and ushers did."

In the Kingdom of God you and I have been given so much. We've been showered with generosity. Not condo on the beach luxury. Better than that. We've been showered with what satisfies our soul. How about life itself? Meaningful life. Mercy. God's acceptance. His trust. God believes in us. And it is completely inappropriate to withhold all mercy and acceptance and trust from one another. You and I are rich beyond imagining—not in luxuries—but in God's love. And we can easily afford, indeed we dare not omit to pass that along to others.

Let's pause for a second and back up and take in the whole lesson. It starts with Peter and Jesus talking. Peter understands that forgiveness of one another is important. So he asks Jesus, "Okay, obviously we can't forgive all day long, but we're hearing from you Lord that we've got to forgive. So would seven forgivenesses get the job done?"

Jesus responds: "How about seventy-seven?" Then Jesus tells this story about the forgiven servant. "Peter, open your

eyes! In the Kingdom of God there is so much grace showering down, that it completely changes how we can and should treat each other."

I think you'll be struck as I was by this observation by the brainy and influential Christian philosopher, Dallas Willard. Willard has said that the way people treat each other in our world is not normal. It seems normal because it's all we've ever known. But it's not the way God designed or wishes for us to live. You see, there is so much greed and mistrust and addiction and dysfunction suffered by so many of that a coldness mean-spirit between people has become the norm. We're mistrusting, don't know or care about neighbors, legalistic, ungenerous. On and on. And we think that this is just the way the world is.

Dallis Willard, a Southern Californian, said that he got a little glimpse of what the kingdom looks like when on a country road another driver waved as he passed in the opposite lane. In rural Georgia! Southern hospitality. But Jesus has much more in mind. Southern hospitality on steroids.

What Jesus is saying today is that the conditions for that warm human climate are coming and have already arrived.

What can each of us do so that this story can have its way in our lives and be God's word for us? We can begin by taking a

personal inventory of our blessings. Think! God has utterly accepted us through Jesus Christ. He works with us every hour by encircling us with experiences that make us better. God has given us beauty, people to love us, tall challenges that call on all we've got. We have been given unimaginably rich lives. What is to prevent us from letting that simply flow through us to others? What do we need that prevents us from forgiving and showing mercy to those around?

The Kingdom has overtaken us. We really can live differently, generously, magnanimously. And if we won't treat others with kindness—and this is the warning part of this parable—haven't we really demonstrated that we simply haven't understood what's been granted to us? And not understanding don't we also forfeit it?