

A Tale of Unreasonable Grace

Meta

Date: September 13, 2026

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Readings

Sirach 27:30–28:7

Psalms 103:1–14

Romans 14:5–12

Matthew 18:21–35

Opening

If you didn't grow up Anglican, know that you're in the vast majority of folk here at Apostles. The greatest percentage of cradle Anglicans among us haven't reached their 18th birthday. We've come from so many different Christian traditions before we came to Apostles.

Some of you have belonged to churches where the preacher proclaimed his trust in the Scriptures saying, 'I believe in the Word of God from Genesis to the Maps!' I've been in those churches myself. But I've never heard anyone say, 'I believe in the Word of God from Genesis to the currency tables!' Doesn't have the same punch, does it? Currency conversion tables aren't nearly as interesting as maps, anyway.

But there are some instances in Scripture where knowing currency conversions is vital information in a biblical story. We have one before us today in the Parable of the Talents. (Turn with me in your pew Bible to page ###)

We have a servant who is in debt up to his neck and then some. The first indebted servant owes ten thousand talents. A single talent equals 20 years of annual wages.

Ten thousand talents is the largest amount you would write in the ancient Greek language. It's like in middle school, when we said a zillion was the largest number, some know-it-all said, no, it's a google. Of course that means something entirely different now. But in the ancient world, ten thousand talents was an unthinkable amount. I'll do the actual math for you. The average life expectancy in Jesus' world was maybe 40 years old. That means our indebted servant owes the king wages that equal 500 lifetimes. See—currency tables can be crucial in some stories.

Defaulting on this debt meant our desperate servant would be sold into slavery with his wife and children. Perhaps we can hear how pitiful and delusional his request, when on bended knee he says to the king, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' Please, your royal highness, just hold on for 500 lifetimes and I'll get this thing paid in full. Words every creditor wants to hear.

But this is no ordinary creditor. Looking at the servant kneeling down in brokenness, the king erupts with compassion. Our translation of verse 27 is much too tame, which reads: 'Out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave his debt.' That's our English Standard Version. But this is the same word used when Matthew says Jesus was 'deeply moved with compassion.' It's a physiological word that describes mercy coming from the gut. His plight, his destitute state, his overwhelm—it reached the king's deep heart. The servant wanted more time. That was his request. The king doesn't give more time; instead he cancels the debt entirely. His king erased the balance that would have covered five centuries.

One would think that being freed from such a burden, our servant would celebrate. Instead he goes on a collection mission himself.

Once he's debt free, he remembers a debt owed by another. A fellow servant has an outstanding IOU. All along this first servant has been keeping count and we didn't know it. He had a ledger in his mind.

Last week I spoke about walking through the Sermon on the Mount before we apply the reconciliation process Jesus provides in Matthew 18. Before we approach a brother about an offense they have committed against us, we must go through Matthew 7 first. Take the 2x4 out of your eye before you help your brother wash a speck of sawdust in his eye. That was an absurd image and today we have a cautionary parable with the same principle too.

How much does this fellow owe our first servant? A hundred denarii. Back to the currency tables! How much is that conversion? Three months of wages. A speck of coins, we could say. This isn't an advanced financial analysis—anyone can see that three months is considerably less than 500 lifetimes.

The first servant was pardoned for his impossible debt, but paid no mind to the anger remaining within him. And wow, there's some anger inside. Our church fathers teach us that remembrance of wrongs is the consummation of anger within.¹ And so our forgiven, but angry, servant goes for the throat—literally.

When that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.'

What happens next could have been a wake up call. This is a masterpiece of a story in several ways and here's one example. The servant who owes 100 denarii pleads for mercy *in the exact same way with the exact words* our first servant spoke when he came before the king. Both fall down in their desperation and both say, 'Have patience with me and I will pay you.' It could have been his wake up call, the moment he comes to himself. I've been on my knees pleading for mercy. I've said those same words.

As I said earlier, this parable is profound and it's a cautionary tale. It's a story that shows us that there are moments of waking up, opportunities to repent of a hardened heart. This is how the Holy Spirit works on us. If we have eyes to see, there are moments when he gives us mirrors into our soul, seeing ourselves. That's what the forgiven servant was given in the midst of his anger.

But instead of seeing himself, he settles the score. He imprisons the indebted servant—for owing a mere three months of wages. No extended time, no payment plan. He wants him locked up with no delay.

This is the outcome of a soul locked up by anger, a soul that keeps a record of wrongs. It wants to see others locked up, too.

How vastly different is the soul that sees with the eyes of love. For love is patient and love is kind. Love is not irritable. Love does not count up wrongdoing.² And as I have heard others say, it is also true that love does not count.

¹ St. John Climacus, *Ladder of Divine Ascent*.

² 1 Corinthians 13.4-5

Peter's Question

Counting was the occasion for telling this cautionary tale to begin with. Peter was counting. When we hear this parable, we are not far removed from that peak moment when Peter professed Jesus as the Christ; when Christ said that he would give to the apostles the keys of the kingdom. That whatever they bind on earth will be bound in heaven; whatever they loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Jesus said it a second time to his apostles in Matthew 18—this calling of binding and loosing—just before he told this parable.

With the binding and loosing of sins on his mind, Peter was counting. That's what prompted this story. Peter said:

Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"

He had been given the keys of the kingdom, but he did not yet have the heart of the king. He thought he was impressing Jesus. The rabbis said we should forgive our brother three times, and Peter has doubled it. Look how generous and patient Peter is! But he was still checking his ledger; still counting. But the king has an absurd love. Not double. Not seven. But seventy times seven. The reach of his forgiveness is unreasonable, beyond what we could ask, think, count or imagine.

Meeting at the Cross of Christ

In one sense, this parable ends as a tragedy—the once-forgiven turned vicious servant ends up imprisoned himself—imprisoned because of his own unforgiveness. In another sense, when we read this parable with the whole story of Jesus, we see an even greater glory.

Throughout his Gospel, Matthew has a special interest in Peter and his interactions with Jesus.³ Read today's Gospel passage again and you'll find that this story was told *specifically* to Peter. Peter came up to Jesus with his question, then Jesus said to Peter, 'the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king...' Were the eleven nearby? Maybe, but maybe not. It's just as possible that this was a one-on-one parable, spoken to the chief of the apostles.

And it was a story that Jesus told Peter only weeks before Palm Sunday, before the Last Supper, before our Lord was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane.

The same one who would commit the most bitter betrayals of King Jesus on the night of his trial. This is the same Peter who promised he would never forsake the Lord, yet he abandoned the Lord when he was crucified.

When Christ was lifted on the cross, a sign read 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.' Peter had asked if he should forgive his brother seven times. Jesus' greatest answer was not just this story, but the answer of his broken body—bearing seven wounds when he was crucified so that we might receive the forgiveness of our sins.

³ Davies, W. D., and Dale C. Allison Jr. A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew. Vol. 2. International Critical Commentary. London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004.

And what did our Lord say when he was nailed to the cross, when the deepest hatred and anger erupted from the human heart, reviling him in his suffering? 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.'

Here is the King who will forgive even more than a debt of 500 lifetimes. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The mindset of 'You owe me' meets its end at the foot of the cross.

I do not suggest that forgiveness is easy. There is no question that forgiveness can be excruciating for us. The offenses we have born, the losses and injustices one endures, the wounds that remain—it seems like it's too much. Until you come to the cross of Jesus. Until I remember that, not only Peter, but I am the disciple who abandoned Jesus when he was led to the Cross, I have not perceived the power of his forgiveness.

When I ponder my wounds, my hurt, what I feel like I'm owed (like the unforgiving servant), I'm unable to forgive in my own strength. But when I gaze on Jesus, the King of mercy; when I meditate on the cross and the wounds by which I've been forgiven and healed, my heart softens. I see how patient, how gracious, how merciful, how loving he has been toward me. When I ponder his grace with gratitude, the Holy Spirit produces power and strength to forgive that I could not generate myself. St Ephrem the Syrian said

if you have made peace with your brother below, then you have made peace also with the Lord on high. If you receive your brother, then you also receive your Lord.

Forgiveness does not mean that all has been repaired in a relationship. Forgiveness means that I will not hold my neighbor's offense against him. No grudges. I'm not tabulating his wrongs for an opportune time. I will desire his welfare, his good, in this life and the life to come.

Restoring trust in a relationship takes time and a deeper work of the Holy Spirit after forgiveness has been given. But even then, when trust needs mending, we come to Christ. Let us remember that the Christ who forgave his persecutors from the cross rose again. By his wounds on the cross we are healed. And his wounds are healed too! He showed his disciples in the Upper Room his hands and side, the places of his suffering now gloriously healed. And there he gave them the power to forgive sins by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Our Lord and King gave us the command that we forgive our brother from our heart. Because this is his own heart and the very heart of his kingdom. And we are his royal sons and daughters. This is our spiritual inheritance. Lord, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. And all for the glory of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.