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### Quick Links to the Study

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This is the fourth of six lessons from Matthew on the parables of Jesus in the Formations series of the Smyth-Helwys studies. This parable comes from the M source, that is, only Matthew relates this parable of Jesus. The other gospel accounts do not contain it. Just as with the preceding lessons, the extra steps involved in interpreting parables apply here also, and will be implemented in our study of this parable. Although the S-H lesson material indicate only verses 23-35 as the study material, the narrative introduction to the parable in verses 21-22 are crucial for proper understanding of the parable in its literary context in Matthew, and thus will be included in our study.

#### I. Context

Since most of the contextual issues, at least at the broad level, remain the same as from the preceding lessons taken from Matthew's gospel, we will simply refer to that material and work off it for our detailed study of 18:21-35. The study on the Parable of the Tares in Matt. 13 is the starting point. See this listing in pdf format at Cranfordville.com under New Testament Bible Studies.

##### a. Historical

The conclusion reached in the Matthew 13 study above will be assumed here for the **external history** issues. This document comes to us in the early 70s of the first Christian century from the Roman province of Syria and is addressed primarily to Jewish Christians facing pressure to return to the synagogue in abandonment of their Christian commitment as an act of patriotic loyalty to their Jewish ethnic and religious heritage. The Matthean community in either Antioch or Damascus produces this writing to demonstrate that commitment to Jesus in the only way to stand solidly and faithfully in the stream of God's covenant based actions begun with Abraham and Moses in the Old Testament. This because Jesus' life and ministry represent the true culmination of what God started with the forefathers of the Jewish people.

The **internal history** of our passage represents a shift from the previous lessons that were taken from chapter thirteen of Matthew. Our passage was positioned by Matthew historically at the very end of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, just before he began the trek south down the east bank of the Jordan headed to Jerusalem for the Jewish Passover celebration in the spring of A.D. 30. In my Life of Christ outline at Cranfordville.com, this shows up as the last pericope of the Phase Three segment of Jesus' Galilean Ministry. This segment of ministry is summarized in my Lecture Notes based on the outline as follows:

This third segment of Jesus' ministry in northern Palestine lasts just a brief period of no more than two to three months just prior to his departure south to Judea where he will spend the remaining time leading up to the celebration of the Jewish Passover in the spring of AD 30. It is at this celebration that he is arrested and then executed by the Roman authorities.

The defining marker of the beginning of this period of ministry in northern Palestine is the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000, the only miracle of Jesus to be recorded by all four gospel writers. As is obvious from the above charts, Mark and Matthew contain the most detailed accounting of this period of activity, while John has the shortest

account with only five pericopes. A careful reading of these gospel texts will reveal that most of the recorded activity of Jesus during this period occurs outside the Roman province of Galilee. Because of the personal danger to Jesus once Roman governmental opposition to Jesus linked up with the religious opposition of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, Jesus conducted most of his ministry in the adjacent provinces where Herod had no jurisdiction. Quick trips across Galilee from one province to another will punctuate his activity. Additionally, this period stresses a growing focus on preparing the Twelve for what would lay ahead in Jerusalem. Thus, ministry time is more divided between public actions and private actions with just the Twelve.

Thus, with this parable we have a different historical setting in the life of Jesus. Ministry in Galilee is at a close; it's time to head south for the Passover celebration. Jesus was fully aware of the cruelty that would be unleashed on him by the authorities in Jerusalem. But in this larger historical setting of growing danger and hostility toward him, he challenged Peter and the other disciples to accept a radical view of forgiving others that went way beyond anything they had been taught in their Jewish upbringing.

## **b. Literary**

The literary setting of our passage takes on special significance, in part because of the pericope uniquely showing up in Matthew and not in any of the other gospel accounts. Additionally, its position in the Matthean gospel suggests a more than usual role to be played.

In the [Literary Outline](#) of Matthew at Cranfordville.com, 18:21-35 shows up as a part of the Fourth Discourse materials -- out of a total of five -- that comprise all of chapter eighteen:

*The Prologue* Matt. 1-2

**Book One:** *The Son begins to proclaim the Kingdom* Matt. 3:1-7:29

*Narrative:* Beginnings of the ministry Matt. 3:1-4:25

*Discourse:* The Sermon on the Mount Matt. 5:1-7:29

**Book Two:** *The mission of Jesus and his disciples in Galilee* Matt. 8:1-11:1

*Narrative:* The cycle of nine miracle stories Matt. 8:1-9:38

*Discourse:* The mission, past and future Matt. 10:1-11:1

**Book Three:** *Jesus meets opposition from Israel* Matt. 11:2-13:53

*Narrative:* Jesus disputes with Israel and condemns it Matt. 11:2-12:50

*Discourse:* Jesus withdraws from Israel into parabolic speech Matt. 13:1-53

**Book Four:** *The Messiah forms his church and prophesies his passion* Matt. 13:54-18:35

*Narrative:* The itinerant Jesus prepares for the church by his deeds Matt. 13:54-17:27

*Discourse:* **Church life and order** Matt. 18:1-35

**Book Five:** *The Messiah and his church on the way to the passion* Matt. 19:1-25:46

*Narrative:* Jesus leads his disciples to the cross as he confounds his enemies. Mat. 19:1-23:29

*Discourse:* The Last Judgment Matt. 24-25

*The Climax:* Death-Resurrection Matt. 26-28

From Wednesday to Thursday night Matt. 26:1-75

From Friday morning to Saturday Matt. 27:1-66

From Sunday to the End of the Age Matt. 28:1-20

Richard B. Gardner ("Matthew," *Believers Church Bible Commentary*, iPreach) provides a helpful summary of the situation here:

The phrase *from that time on* in 16:21 signals a major shift in Matthew's narrative (cf. the same phrase in 4:17). Up to this point, Jesus' ministry to Israel has been centered on Galilee. From now on, however, everything will be oriented toward the city of Jerusalem—and toward the fate awaiting Jesus when he gets to Jerusalem. One of the ways Matthew makes this shift clear to the reader is through sayings in which Jesus predicts his passion or suffering (cf. 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19). In addition, Matthew uses the motif of a journey to Jerusalem as a narrative framework for the section (cf. 19:1-2; 20:17; 20:29). Although the journey does not actually begin until 19:1, Jesus' decision to make the journey is clear from the outset, and there is a mood of anxious anticipation from that moment on.

While the story is taking shape along the lines just described, Jesus is busy preparing his followers for what lies ahead. At one level, the instruction Jesus gives is preparing the twelve for the particular circumstances they

will face in Jerusalem and beyond. At another level, Jesus is instructing disciples of every age, future members of the church he has promised to build (cf. 16:18-19). To put it another way, the teaching in 16:21—20:34 is a resource for the formation of faith and community.

Thus chapter eighteen brings to a climatic close this section of the Jesus' story by Matthew, as well as sets the stage for the next section of the story focused in Jerusalem.

Chapter eighteen is composed of several pericopes, as the [following list](#) illustrates from Cranfordville.com:

- 114. Greatness is childlikeness 18:1-5
- 115. Resist the temptation to offend 18:6-9
- 116. Love all God's sheep 18:10-14
- 117. Offending brother 18:15-20
- 118. Show mercy 18:21-35

Identifying the thought flow of this material usually goes one of two directions, as Donald Senior ("Matthew," *Abingdon New Testament Commentary*, iPreach) describes:

The structure of the discourse is debated. Six distinct segments make up its contents: (1) 18:1-5, concerning the "child"; (2) 18:6-9, concerning scandal to "one of these little ones"; (3) 18:10-14, the parable of the good shepherd; (4) 18:15-20, the procedure for handling disputes and the underlying authority of the community; (5) 18:21-22, Peter's question about the limits of forgiveness; (6) 18:23-35, the concluding parable of the merciless servant. Yet these are by no means independent units; they are linked into overarching themes. Some (see, e.g., Pesch 1966) consider the two parables, each ending with a decisive saying about the "Father in heaven," as the anchors for a two-part division: (1) 18:1-14, dealing with care for the vulnerable members of the community; (2) 18:15-35, dealing with alienation and forgiveness within the community.

The segment on procedures for handling disputes within the community (18:15-20), however, stands out within the discourse and may suggest a threefold division of the whole (for further discussion of the discourse's structure, see Davies and Allison 1991, 750-51; Thompson 1970, 238-52). As will be suggested below, Matthew may have seen the issue of expulsion as a necessary pastoral decision, but one to be tempered by the even more fundamental values of attentive pastoral care and an unlimited capacity for reconciliation.

Although a threefold division of the material is possible, the arguments for a twofold division seem more persuasive to me. Gene Boring ("Matthew," vol. 8 in the *New Interpreters Bible*, iPreach) has a helpful way of summing up the material on the basis of a twofold thought division:

Matthew is here following the order of Q injunctions, long familiar to his community (cf. Luke 17:1-4; Introduction). The discourse is divided into two sections, each of which is concluded by a parable and a concluding statement beginning with "so," "thus" (οὕτως houtos), a reference to the heavenly Father and the subject of the preceding section (v. 14, "little ones"; v. 35, "forgiving the brother or sister"). The key term "little ones" serves as the structuring factor, beginning and ending units at vv. 6, 10, and 14. Each of the two major sections has Matthew's characteristic three subsections, giving the following outline of the discourse.

Assuming the correctness of this rhetorical structure for chapter eighteen, the most immediate context for verses 21-35 is 18:15-35 with the emphasis upon alienation and forgiveness in the community of faith. Thus the pericope, 18:15-20, especially needs to be kept in mind when interpreting verses 21-35 (NRSV):

15 "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. 16 But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

The role of verses 21-35 then seems to be to counter balance verses 15-20, which taken out of context could seem to legitimize a very harsh approach to fellow church members. The subsequent emphasis upon forgiveness provides a crucial setting for this passage as well as a warning against using it as a billy club against people inside the community of faith that one has grudges against. Conversely, vv. 15-20 help remind us that the emphasis upon forgiveness in vv. 21-35 cannot be interpreted correctly as an open ended demand to forgive with the resultant feeling that wrong action has no consequence regardless of



the circumstance.

Thus literary setting plays an unusually significant role in the interpretation of our passage.

## II. Message

The structure of our passage is quite clear. It is a dialogical narrative (conversation between two individuals) in the form of a question and an answer. Peter asked the question (v. 21), and Jesus answered it (vv. 22-35). His answer falls into two segments: (1) a statement of axiomatic principle (v. 22) and a parabolic story to reinforce the saying (vv. 23-35).

### a. Peter's Question, v. 21

GNT	NASB	NRSV	NLT
<18:21> Τότε προσελθὼν ὁ Πέτρος εἶπεν αὐτῷ, Κύριε, ποσάκις ἁμαρτήσῃ εἰς ἐμὲ ὁ ἀδελφός μου καὶ ἀφήσω αὐτῷ; ἕως ἐπτάκις;	21 Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"	21 Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I for- give? As many as seven times?"	21 Then Peter came to him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?"

#### Notes:

The introductory segment to the parable, vv. 21-22, does stand together literarily as a [Pronouncement Story](#) in abbreviated form. This was an ancient narrative form in which the story leads up to a timeless, significant teaching (the pronouncement) by the central character of the story. Thus, Jesus' reply to Peter's question, particularly the initial response in verse 22, stands as the pronouncement. In this ancient form, the story part is secondary to the pronouncement part and mostly is used to provide a platform for the central character to issue an important statement that transcends the story setting.

But in the way that Matthew has woven together the text, the thought flow of the Greek text still flows in our two-part division of question and answer. Thus we will deal with it in this manner.

Two introductory segments set the stage for Peter's question: (1) "Then" (Τότε) and (2) "came" (προσελθὼν; lit. 'after having come to'). The first word, "Τότε," is an adverb of time with the meaning either "at that time" or "next, after that." It is a [favorite word](#) for Matthew who uses it some 90 times in his gospel. The point of the word is to link verses 21-22 to verses 15-20 as the next event in his sequence. The other term, προσελθὼν, (actually an Aorist temporal participle in the Greek), serves to introduce the main expression, "Peter said to him" (ὁ Πέτρος εἶπεν αὐτῷ). Again, it is a favorite expression in Matthew (51 of 86 [uses](#) in the New Testament). Where Peter was is unclear. In listening to what Jesus had just spoken about taking disciplinary action against an offending brother, Peter steps up with a proposal regarding forgiveness. This is one possible understanding. The alternative is that Matthew has taken a piece of oral tradition on forgiveness initially given by Jesus in another undetermined setting and positioned it sequentially here in order to help define his point about church disciplinary actions (vv. 15-20). Most scholars will adopt this second viewpoint.

Now to Peter's question: "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" (NRSV; Κύριε, ποσάκις ἁμαρτήσῃ εἰς ἐμὲ ὁ ἀδελφός μου καὶ ἀφήσω αὐτῷ; ἕως ἐπτάκις;) In the larger context this question picks up on the sinner brother issue first introduced in verse 15a: "If your brother may sin against you..." (Ἐὰν δὲ ἁμαρτήσῃ εἰς σὲ ὁ ἀδελφός σου...). The intent in going to such a fellow Christian with a word of private reproof (ἐλεγξον αὐτὸν μεταξύ σοῦ καὶ αὐτοῦ μόνον) is to find restoration of healthy relations (v. 15b). If this goal is unreachable, then community disciplinary action is to be taken (vv. 16-20). Now Peter's question shifts to the forgiveness that is foundation to genuine restoration of spiritual relationship. Repentance by the offender is treated in verse 15 and the rest of that pericope. Thus, it is presupposed here in 21-35.

Peter's question is framed in terms of "how often" (ποσάκις; [posakis](#)) with the proposal of up to seven times (ἕως ἐπτάκις). As D. A. Carson ("Matthew," *New Bible Commentary*, Logos Systems) observes, "Peter's offer of *seven times* sounds generous (a later rabbinic discussion suggests *three times as reasonable*)..."

But there may very well be something else going on here. The Old Testament episode of Cain and Abel is clearly in the background here from [Genesis 4](#). When Cain complained to God that his punishment for murdering his brother Abel was too much, God promised a sevenfold vengeance on anyone who harmed Cain (NRSV):

13 Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is greater than I can bear! 14 Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me." 15 Then the Lord said to him, "Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a **sevenfold vengeance**." And the Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him.

Then, later in that same passage, Lamech the great grandson of Cain's younger brother Enoch declared (NRSV):

23 Lamech said to his wives: "Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say: I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. 24 If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech **seventy-sevenfold**."

In a converse perspective, the seven times and seventy times seven language is reproduced here on the opposite side of broken relations in a new Christian perspective. Vengeance is not now the goal; instead, the goal is restoration of relationship based on authentic forgiveness. The message of Jesus shifts the focus away from "getting even" to "getting back together." This is a principle far more difficult to implement than that in the Old Testament Law!

Peter at this point was beginning to pick up on the importance of forgiveness, and proposed a solution which I'm sure he felt was extraordinarily generous in light of the OT stress on a sevenfold vengeance. But Jesus' reply blew him away -- and still challenges us today!

## **b. Jesus' Answer, vv. 22-35**

As mentioned above, Jesus' response to Peter's question has two distinct elements: (1) the pronouncement (v. 22) and the parable (vv. 23-35). We will treat them separately.

### **i. The Pronouncement (v. 22)**

GNT	NASB	NRSV	NLT
<18:22> λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς, Οὐ λέγω σοι ἕως ἑπτάκις ἀλλὰ ἕως ἑβδομηκοντάκις ἑπτά.	22 Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.	22 Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.	22 "No!" Jesus replied, "seventy times seven!"

#### **Notes:**

A careful reading of the above three translations of ἑβδομηκοντάκις ἑπτά reveals two understandings of the Greek number: (1) seventy times seven (=490 times) or (2) seventy-seven times. Eugene Boring ("Matthew," vol. 8 in the *New Interpreters Bible*, iPreach) has some helpful comments here:

Jesus' response is far beyond Peter's proposal, and not only in greatly extending the quantity. The Greek number ἑβδομηκοντάκις ἑπτά (hebdomekontakis hepta) can be legitimately understood as "seventy seven times" (as in Gen 4:24, again a reversal of Lamech's pronouncement of vengeance) or "four hundred ninety times" (as in the ancient translations of the NT). The difference between Peter's proposal and Jesus' pronouncement is not a matter of math or linguistics, but of the nature of forgiveness. Whoever counts has not forgiven at all, but is only biding his or her time (1 Cor 13:5). The kind of forgiveness called for is beyond all calculation, as the following story communicates.

This realization raises the question, What is forgiveness? In the New Testament, 'forgive' revolves around [three verb stems](#): (1) ἀφίημι, (2) ἀπολύω and (3) χαρίζομαι. The noun ἄφεσις ('forgiveness') occurs some 16 times, while the verb ἀφίημι surfaces 133 times. The root idea of this word group is to "send away" in the sense of letting go of something. The [second verb](#) ἀπολύω has the idea of 'release' or 'setting free,' which sometimes shades over into the idea of forgive in the 63 NT uses. The other verb χαρίζομαι carries the idea of gracious bestowal of forgiveness with focus on restoration, and shows up some 19 times. Barry D. Smith ([Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology](#)) has an excellent summary of the biblical concept of forgiveness. In biblical thinking, forgiveness is central to the individual's

relationship with God where God forgives us, and also in Christianity one's forgiveness of other people is critically important as well. On the matter of horizontal forgiveness, Smith has a helpful summary:

In the Lord's Prayer, receiving forgiveness from God is joined to forgiving others (Matt 6:12; Luke 11:4). Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant makes the point that human beings are obliged to forgive because God has forgiven them (Matt 18:23-35). God's forgiveness is actually said to be conditional upon forgiving others (Matt 6:14; 18:35; Mark 11:25-26; Luke 6:37). Jesus says that there ought to be no limit on the number of times that one should forgive another so long as the offender repents and asks for forgiveness (Matt 18:21-22; Luke 17:3-4).

As most commentators point out, Jesus' response to Peter pushes the issue of letting go of grudges and determination to seek vengeance beyond keeping a check list of how many times. In real forgiveness we truly "let it go." We turn loose of the barriers to positive relationships with other people. But forgiveness is more than just 'turning loose.' The other verbs along with the New Testament teaching in general stress an active effort to rebuild positive relationships. To be certain, the earlier pericope (18:15-20) underscores that repentance by the offender plays a pivotal role in achieving that goal. But Jesus' emphasis here (vv. 21-22) stresses that repentance must trigger a genuine 'letting go' of whatever negative feelings we have toward the person who sinned against us. This we must always be prepared to do as people who have been recipients of God's forgiveness, as the parable that follows stresses.

## ii. The Parable (vv. 23-35)

GNT	NASB	NRSV	NLT
<p>&lt;18:23&gt; Διὰ τοῦτο ὁμοιώθη ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ἀνθρώπῳ βασιλεῖ, ὃς ἠθέλησεν συναῖραι λόγον μετὰ τῶν δούλων αὐτοῦ. &lt;18:24&gt; ἀρξαμένου δὲ αὐτοῦ συναίρειν προσηνέχθη αὐτῷ εἷς ὀφειλέτης μυρίων ταλάντων. &lt;18:25&gt; μὴ ἔχοντος δὲ αὐτοῦ ἀποδοῦναι ἐκέλευσεν αὐτὸν ὁ κύριος πρᾶθῆναι καὶ τὴν γυναῖκα καὶ τὰ τέκνα καὶ πάντα ὅσα ἔχει, καὶ ἀποδοθῆναι. &lt;18:26&gt; πεσὼν οὖν ὁ δοῦλος προσεκύνει αὐτῷ λέγων, Μακροθύμησον ἐπ' ἐμοί, καὶ πάντα ἀποδώσω σοι. &lt;18:27&gt; σπλαγχνισθεὶς δὲ ὁ κύριος τοῦ δούλου ἐκείνου ἀπέλυσεν αὐτόν καὶ τὸ δάνειον ἀφῆκεν αὐτῷ. &lt;18:28&gt; ἐξελθὼν δὲ ὁ δοῦλος ἐκεῖνος εὔρεν ἓνα τῶν συνδούλων αὐτοῦ, ὃς ὥφειλεν αὐτῷ ἑκατὸν δηνάρια, καὶ κρατήσας αὐτὸν ἔπνιγεν λέγων, Ἀπόδος εἰ τι</p>	<p>23 "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 "When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. 25 "But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. 26 "So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' 27 "And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. 28 "But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back</p>	<p>23 "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 25 and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. 26 So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27 And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe.' 29 Then his fellow slave fell</p>	<p>23 "For this reason, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. 24 In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. 25 He couldn't pay, so the king ordered that he, his wife, his children, and everything he had be sold to pay the debt. 26 But the man fell down before the king and begged him, 'Oh, sir, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.' 27 Then the king was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt. 28 "But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment. 29 His fellow servant fell down before him and begged</p>



ὀφείλεις. <18:29> πεσὼν οὖν ὁ σύνδουλος αὐτοῦ παρεκάλει αὐτὸν λέγων, Μακροθύμησον ἐπ' ἐμοί, καὶ ἀποδώσω σοι. <18:30> ὁ δὲ οὐκ ἠθέληεν ἀλλὰ ἀπελθὼν ἔβαλεν αὐτὸν εἰς φυλακὴν ἕως ἀποδοῦν τὸ ὀφειλόμενον <18:31> ἰδόντες οὖν οἱ σύνδουλοι αὐτοῦ τὰ γενόμενα ἐλυπήθησαν σφόδρα καὶ ἐλθόντες διεσάφησαν τῷ κυρίῳ ἐαυτῶν πάντα τὰ γενόμενα. <18:32> τότε προσκαλεσάμενος αὐτὸν ὁ κύριος αὐτοῦ λέγει αὐτῷ, Δοῦλε πονηρέ, πᾶσαν τὴν ὀφειλὴν ἐκείνην ἀφήκᾳ σοι, ἐπεὶ παρεκάλεσάς με· <18:33> οὐκ ἔδει καὶ σὲ ἐλεῆσαι τὸν σύνδουλόν σου, ὡς καὶ ἐγὼ σὲ ἤλεσα; <18:34> καὶ ὀργισθεὶς ὁ κύριος αὐτοῦ παρέδωκεν αὐτὸν τοῖς βασανισταῖς ἕως οὗ ἀποδοῦν πᾶν τὸ ὀφειλόμενον. <18:35> Οὕτως καὶ ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ οὐράνιος ποιήσει ὑμῖν, ἐὰν μὴ ἀφῆτε ἕκαστος τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν καρδιῶν ὑμῶν.

what you owe.' 29 "So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' 30 "But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. 31 "So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. 32 "Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 'Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?' 34 "And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. 35 "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."

down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30 But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 31 When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32 Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" 34 And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. 35 So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

for a little more time. 'Be patient and I will pay it,' he pleaded. 30 But his creditor wouldn't wait. He had the man arrested and jailed until the debt could be paid in full. 31 "When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him what had happened. 32 Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?' 34 Then the angry king sent the man to prison until he had paid every penny. 35 "That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters in your heart."

#### Notes:

Literarily, this parable is linked to the pronouncement by the words "For this reason" (Διὰ τοῦτο) as the logical foundation for the pronouncement in verse 22. This provides an important clue to the point of the parable ([tertium comparationis](#)). What we see here is Jesus basing human forgiveness (horizontal) on divine forgiveness (vertical) in the same manner as Barry Smith summarized above, especially in the Lord's Prayer ([Matt. 6:12, 14-15](#)):

12 And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. . . . 14 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; 15 but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

The length of the story details suggests a [Narrative Parable form](#), but the presence of introductory comparative language (the kingdom of God is like...) is more in character with the middle category of [Simple Parable](#). Thus the parable stands on the border between the two types. More importantly, the type of parable here is that of a [Contrast Parable](#). These parables "compare one or two examples of negative attitudes or actions related to God's kingdom with a positive example--or vice versa."

In the setting of Jesus' ministry (Sitz im Leben Jesu), the earthly story emerges from an ancient Oriental monarch, and probably echoed tones of the Jewish experience in Babylonian Exile before the beginning

of the Christian era. Once again we turn to Gene Boring's helpful summation of the earthly story aspect:

The story unfolds in three scenes:

**18:24-27, King and Servant.** The servant is not a household slave, but a subordinate official (the NIV is here better than the NRSV). The debt was incurred through mismanagement of the king's resources and/or contracting to raise taxes from subject nations, not by personal expenditures. Even so, the figure is not realistic. A talent is the largest monetary unit (20.4 kg of silver), equal to 6,000 drachmas, the wages of a manual laborer for fifteen years. "Ten thousand" (μυριας myrias, "myriad") is the largest possible number. Thus the combination is the largest figure that can be given. The annual tax income for all of Herod the Great's territories was 900 talents per year. Ten thousand talents would exceed the taxes for all of Syria, Phoenicia, Judea, and Samaria. The amount is fantastic, beyond all calculation.<sup>425</sup>

The debt is unpayable. Casting the servant into prison will be punitive—it will pay him back for his utter mismanagement—but it is utterly beyond the realm of possibility that the servant can repay his debt, no matter how much time is given. Both the servant and the king know this, despite vv. 25-26. The servant's situation is hopeless. He asks for mercy, and contrary to all expectation, the king responds with compassion.

**18:28-31, Servant and Servant(s).** The debt of the fellow servant is microscopic compared to what the first servant had been forgiven (1/600,000, if one attempts to be literal, but the figures are intended to represent an infinite contrast). Yet it is not an insignificant amount, representing 100 days' wages for an ordinary laborer (cf. 20:2).<sup>426</sup> When the first servant violently insists on repayment, it is not a trifling sum. The outrageous contrast between the way the first servant is treated by the king and the way the servant treats his fellow servant is not just a contrast of amounts owed. In the first scene, there was no reasonable way to repay such a debt; one could only be condemned or receive mercy. The parallel and contrast between the two scenes is that one is "reasonable" (the second) and one is not (the first). To interpret the first in terms of the second is a mistake; the whole thrust of the parable is to bring the second scene into line with the first. However, this does not happen. The servant does not respond to his fellow servant as he has been treated by the king. This outrages the other servants. The reader shares this outrage and is sympathetic when the other servants report the fellow's conduct to the king.

**18:32-35, King and Servant.** Again, the unthinkable happens. The king takes back his forgiveness, and the servant is condemned to eternal torment.<sup>427</sup> Some scholars think Jesus' original parable ended with the question of 18:33 (cf. the ending of Jonah, 4:11), others that v. 34 was the original conclusion. In any case, Matthew has added v. 35 to make the point in the parable's present context unmistakably clear (cf. 6:14-15).

Many scholars will draw dramatic distinction between the Sitz im Leben Jesu and the Sitz im Leben Verfassers in the meaning of the parable, by insisting that Jesus' originally taught unconditional forgiveness without strings attached, but that Matthew reinterpreted Jesus' words to condition divine forgiveness on human forgiveness. My colleague and friend from days gone by, Gene Boring, takes this view as he summarizes in the New Interpreter's Bible commentary:

The parable thus becomes a vivid illustration of a point that Matthew states elsewhere (6:14-15). This "moral of the story" can be psychologized by arguing that one who does not forgive others has never really received God's forgiveness in the first place, so it is not really "taken back." This may be a counsel of desperation in trying to make unilinear, non-parabolic sense of a disorienting parable. In the Matthean story, the problem remains that the king ("God") went back on his forgiveness. It is better to let the story remain unallegorized, so that it is an earthly king who reneges on his original gracious forgiveness, and let it illustrate, in an analogous way, the awfulness of failing to forgive as God forgives. This means that parables are often best preached as parables, even when Matthew has allegorized them. Matthew's legitimate allegorizing points can still be made independently of the parable, on the basis of Matthew's theology taken from the Gospel as a whole.

But to draw these conclusions is without adequate foundation, in my estimation. A much more consistent approach is to see the point of the parable here as essentially the same point of the Lord's Prayer. Both play off the foundational principle in both the Old and New Testaments: *our relationship with God is inextricably linked to our relationship with other people*. Religion and behavior do flow out of each other. When it comes to the matter of forgiveness, we as followers of Jesus claiming to be God's children must reflect His posture of a forgiving spirit. Forgiveness is not a legalistic check list allowing us to reach a certain number and then be free to "lower the boom" on the offending person. Our redeemed nature must be willing to say with Jesus while hanging on the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34, NRSV). First and foremost, the religion taught by Jesus is focused on building spiritually healthy relationships both with God and with other people. Barriers to that kind of relationship cannot be ignored; instead, they must be addressed in the most positive manner possible. Out of a healthy relationship with the Father, we have His powerful presence to build good relations with others!



# GNT - Diagram

21 Τότε  
προσελθὼν

1 ὁ Πέτρος εἶπεν αὐτῷ,

α Κύριε,  
ποσάκις ἁμαρτήσῃ εἰς ἐμέ ὁ ἀδελφός μου  
καὶ  
β ἀφήσω αὐτῷ;  
γ (ἀφήσω αὐτῷ)  
ἕως ἑπτάκις;

2 22 λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς,

δ Οὐ λέγω σοι  
(ἀφήσεις αὐτῷ)  
ἕως ἑπτάκις  
ε ἀλλὰ  
(λέγω σοι)  
(ἀφήσεις αὐτῷ)  
ἕως ἑβδομηκοντάκις ἑπτά.

23 | ----- |  
ζ Διὰ τοῦτο  
ὁμοιώθη ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν  
ἀνθρώπῳ βασιλεῖ,  
ὃς ἠθέλησεν συναῖραι λόγον  
μετὰ τῶν δούλων αὐτοῦ.

24 δὲ  
ἀρξαμένου αὐτοῦ συναίρειν  
η προσηνέχθη αὐτῷ εἰς ὀφειλέτης μυρίων ταλάντων.

25 δὲ  
μὴ ἔχοντος αὐτοῦ ἀποδοῦναι  
θ ἐκέλευσεν αὐτὸν ὁ κύριοςπραθῆναι  
καὶ  
τὴν γυναῖκα  
καὶ  
τὰ τέκνα  
καὶ  
πάντα ὅσα ἔχει,  
καὶ  
ι ἀποδοθῆναι.

26 οὖν  
λ πεσὼν  
ὁ δούλος προσεκύνει αὐτῷ  
λέγων,  
Μακροθύμησον  
ἐπ' ἐμοί,  
καὶ  
πάντα ἀποδώσω σοι.

27

δὲ

σπλαγχνισθεῖς

μ

ὁ κύριος τοῦ δούλου ἐκείνου ἀπέλυσεν αὐτόν

καὶ

ν

τὸ δάνειον ἀφῆκεν αὐτῷ.

28

δὲ

ἐξελθὼν

ξ

ὁ δούλος ἐκεῖνος εὗρεν ἓνα

τῶν συνδούλων αὐτοῦ,

ὃς ὤφειλεν αὐτῷ ἑκατὸν δηνάρια,

καὶ

κρατήσας αὐτόν

ο

ἔπνιγεν

λέγων,

Ἀπόδος εἴ τι ὀφείλεις.

29

οὖν

πεσὼν

π

ὁ σύνδουλος αὐτοῦ παρεκάλει αὐτόν

λέγων,

Μακροθύμησον

ἐπ' ἐμοί,

καὶ

ἀποδώσω σοι.

30

δὲ

ρ

ὁ οὐκ ἤθελεν

ἀλλὰ

ἀπελθὼν

σ

ἔβαλεν αὐτόν

εἰς φυλακὴν

ἕως ἀποδοῦν τὸ ὀφειλόμενον

31

οὖν

ιδόντες

τ

οἱ σύνδουλοι αὐτοῦ τὰ γενόμενα ἐλυπήθησαν

σφόδρα

καὶ

ἐλθόντες

υ

διεσάφησαν τῷ κυρίῳ ἐαυτῶν πάντα τὰ γενόμενα.

32

τότε

προσκαλεσάμενος αὐτόν

φ

ὁ κύριος αὐτοῦ λέγει αὐτῷ,

Δοῦλε πονηρέ,

πᾶσαν τὴν ὀφειλὴν ἐκείνην ἀφῆκά σοι,

/-----|

ἐπεὶ παρεκάλεσάς με·

33

οὐκ ἔδει καὶ σὲ ἐλεῆσαι τὸν σύνδουλόν σου,

ὥς καγὼ σὲ ἠλέησα;

34

καὶ

ὀργισθεῖς

χ ὁ κύριος αὐτοῦ παρέδωκεν αὐτὸν τοῖς βασανισταῖς  
ἕως οὗ ἀποδοῦ πᾶν τὸ ὀφειλόμενον.

35

Οὕτως  
καὶ

ψ ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ οὐράνιος ποιήσει ὑμῖν,  
ἐὰν μὴ ἀφῆτε ἕκαστος τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ  
ἀπὸ τῶν καρδιῶν ὑμῶν.

