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~ *The Servant Who Would Not Forgive* ~

You can learn much more about this story by doing these three things:

1. Read Matthew 17:22-18:35.
2. Discover key cultural and historical insights.
3. Answer the reflective questions.

1. Read the text of the story.

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Matthew 17:22-18:35 NASB	Matthew 17:22-18:35 NLT
<p>And while they were gathering together in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men; ²³ and they will kill Him, and He will be raised on the third day.” And they were deeply grieved.</p> <p>²⁴ When they came to Capernaum, those who collected the two-drachma <i>tax</i> came to Peter and said, “Does your teacher not pay the two-drachma <i>tax</i>?” ²⁵ He *said, “Yes.” And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, “What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth collect customs or poll-tax, from their sons or from strangers?” ²⁶ When Peter said, “From strangers,” Jesus said to him, “Then the sons are exempt. ²⁷ However, so that we do not offend them, go to the sea and throw in a hook, and take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for you and Me.”</p> <p>18 At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” ² And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, ³ and said, “Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵ And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me; ⁶ but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.</p> <p>⁷ “Woe to the world because of <i>its</i> stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!</p> <p>⁸ “If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the eternal fire. ⁹ If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be</p>	<p>²² After they gathered again in Galilee, Jesus told them, “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of his enemies. ²³ He will be killed, but on the third day he will be raised from the dead.” And the disciples were filled with grief.</p> <p>²⁴ On their arrival in Capernaum, the collectors of the Temple tax came to Peter and asked him, “Doesn’t your teacher pay the Temple tax?”</p> <p>²⁵ “Yes, he does,” Peter replied. Then he went into the house.</p> <p>But before he had a chance to speak, Jesus asked him, “What do you think, Peter? Do kings tax their own people or the people they have conquered?”</p> <p>²⁶ “They tax the people they have conquered,” Peter replied.</p> <p>“Well, then,” Jesus said, “the citizens are free! ²⁷ However, we don’t want to offend them, so go down to the lake and throw in a line. Open the mouth of the first fish you catch, and you will find a large silver coin. Take it and pay the tax for both of us.”</p> <p>18 About that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?”</p> <p>² Jesus called a little child to him and put the child among them. ³ Then he said, “I tell you the truth, unless you turn from your sins and become like little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven. ⁴ So anyone who becomes as humble as this little child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.</p> <p>⁵ “And anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf is welcoming me. ⁶ But if you cause one of these little ones who trusts in me to fall into sin, it would be better for you to have a large millstone tied around your neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea.</p> <p>⁷ “What sorrow awaits the world, because it tempts people to sin. Temptations are inevitable, but what sorrow awaits the person who does the tempting. ⁸ So if your hand or foot</p>

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cast into the fiery hell.

¹⁰ “See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven. ¹¹ [For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.]

¹² “What do you think? If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying? ¹³ If it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which have not gone astray. ¹⁴ So it is not *the* will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish.

¹⁵ “If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen *to you*, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.

¹⁹ “Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.”

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?” ²² Jesus *said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.

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 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

causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It’s better to enter eternal life with only one hand or one foot than to be thrown into eternal fire with both of your hands and feet. ⁹ And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It’s better to enter eternal life with only one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

¹⁰ “Beware that you don’t look down on any of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels are always in the presence of my heavenly Father.

¹² “If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them wanders away, what will he do? Won’t he leave the ninety-nine others on the hills and go out to search for the one that is lost? ¹³ And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he will rejoice over it more than over the ninety-nine that didn’t wander away! ¹⁴ In the same way, it is not my heavenly Father’s will that even one of these little ones should perish.

¹⁵ “If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back. ¹⁶ But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If the person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church. Then if he or she won’t accept the church’s decision, treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector.

¹⁸ “I tell you the truth, whatever you forbid on earth will be forbidden in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven.

¹⁹ “I also tell you this: If two of you agree here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you. ²⁰ For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them.”

²¹ Then Peter came to him and asked, “Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?”

²² “No, not seven times,” Jesus replied, “but seventy times seven!

²³ “Therefore, 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 his master ordered that he be sold—along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned—to pay the debt.

²⁶ “But the man fell down before his master and begged him, ‘Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.’ ²⁷ Then his master 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

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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."

him by the throat and demanded instant payment.

²⁹ "His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it,' he pleaded. ³⁰ But his creditor wouldn't wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison 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 everything that 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 to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt.

³⁵ "That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart."

2. Discover key cultural and historical insights.

Molina

- The tax, to pay for the upkeep of the Temple and the support of its personnel was to be paid annually by all persons of Israel.
- After the destruction of the temple, the tax was used to rebuild and support the temple of Jupiter.
- Shepherds were despised. They were ranked with donkey drivers, tanners, sailors, butchers, and camel drivers. Because they were away from home at night, they were thought not to be able to protect the honor of their women. They were considered thieves because they would graze sheep on the property of others.
- A sheep that is lost will sit down, refuse to move, and bleat incessantly.

Pentecost

- Priests and eminent rabbis were exempt from the tax.
- Rabbis after the return from Babylon made this voluntary tax (to pay for the temple) mandatory.

Burge

- The story in 18 is preceded by teaching on what to do when one sins against another. This is not just an error but a shameful event whereby one's honor is taken away. One's honor was to be preserved above all else. If someone offended your honor, you would naturally take revenge. But Jesus forbade that in Matt 5, and here he speaks of going a step further and attempting to restore. If the initial attempt at restoration does not work, others are involved with the goal of restoring. If that doesn't work, the community becomes involved with the goal of restoring. Finally, if a person will not repent, he is excluded from the community.

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- The common rabbinic maxim was to forgive three times. Peter doubles this and adds one more for good measure.
- In Genesis 4, Cain was avenged 7 times and Lamech 77 times. Jesus reverses this. Peter said 7 and he said 77 times. The unlimited revenge of Lamech is now replaced with unlimited forgiveness.
- A Gentile king is settling accounts with his financial ministers, regional governors, or tax collectors.
- Tax collectors would bid for such a position because it could bring great wealth. In their bid, they would promise to deliver an annual sum to a king. The king of the area was under pressure from Rome to provide money from his province. Then it was up to him to find the money with his workers to locate as much wealth as they could, and keep a surplus. We are not talking about personal debt but a system of collecting money for government leaders.
- In the story, the servant owed ten thousand talents. This was an absurd amount. A talent was the largest weight of that time, measuring 65 to 95 pounds. In monetary value, one talent equaled 10,000 day's wages for a laborer. Thus, in the story, he owed 100 million day's wages.
- To put this in perspective, in 4 BC, the tax debt of the entire country was 600 talents.
- The tax client would have to work 250,000 years to pay his debt.
- The empire understood that if tax revenues were not coming in to them, then they were not coming in for lower administrative officials. If the empire forgave, lower officials should forgive also.
- The second debtor could be a colleague with a similar problem or a sub-contractor who was not bringing in money or who had a personal debt. He owed a pittance compared to the debt of the first servant.
- Throwing the man in prison shows disloyalty to the king. If he is in prison, he will not be able to work and pay the king. This is not just an issue of hypocrisy. This is an issue of disloyalty. Because he has locked up this man, this man cannot work and collect money for the king. Thus, the first servant really did not learn his lesson and has no regard for the well-being of the king. He is dismissed from his position, becomes a debtor, and he is thrown in prison.

NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible

- Jewish sages sometimes argued about who would be the greatest in the kingdom. Jesus' disciples were interested in this as they expected a kingdom of power and honor. Jesus, however, used a child as an example of greatness.
- Romans sometimes executed people by tying heavy weights around them and pushing them into a body of water. The word used in 18:6 refers to the large community millstone.
- In 18:10, Jesus refers to the angels of the children. Some Jewish people believed that the most powerful angels were those closest to the throne of God.

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- In the story, the king sells the wife and children which the Law of Moses forbade. This, presumably is a Gentile king. He would not come close to getting his money back for selling the family so such an action would just make him feel better.
- The king taking pity on the servant as in 18:27 would show the king to be benevolent and would maintain his esteem among the people.
- The servant who threw his fellow servant into jail would cost the king because the king could not gain anything from yet another servant being taken out of service.

These insights were gleaned from *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* by Bruce Molina, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ* by J.D. Pentecost, *Jesus: The Middle Eastern Storyteller* by Gary Burge, and the NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible.

Answer these reflective questions.

In Matthew 17, Jesus told the disciples for the third time that he was going to Jerusalem to die and to rise again. Why was this so hard for them to understand?

In Matthew 18, Jesus said the greatest in the kingdom of God was like a child. What is it about children that teaches us about the kingdom of God? How do these values challenge the values of the world and what the world thinks is greatness?

What other examples in this passage in Matthew 18:1-10 show us the importance of humility to God? How important are children and humble people to God?

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Jesus gave us specific instructions to follow in 18:15-18 if someone offends us. Have you ever had to carry out these steps? Was your attitude to win the one who had offended you?

In the story of the unforgiving servant, why do you think the first servant refused to forgive the second servant?

Is there anyone in your life that you need to forgive? How can you cultivate a heart of forgiveness? Is there any bitterness you need to overcome?
