



KINGDOM EPIPHANIES

The Unpardonable Sin

January 31, 2021

CALL TO WORSHIP | Psalm 103:1-18

Bless the LORD, O my soul.

From head to toe, I'll bless his holy name!

Bless the LORD, O my soul,

don't forget a single blessing!

He forgives your sins—every one.

He heals your disease—every one.

He redeems you from hell—saves your life!

He crowns you with love and mercy—a paradise crown.

He wraps you in goodness—beauty eternal.

He renews your youth—you're always young in his presence.

GOD makes everything come out right;

he puts victims back on their feet.

He showed Moses how he went about his work,

opened up his plans to all Israel.

GOD is sheer mercy and grace;

not easily angered, he's rich in love.

He doesn't endlessly nag and scold,

nor hold grudges forever.

He doesn't treat us as our sins deserve,

nor pay us back in full for our wrongs.

As high as heaven is over the earth,

so strong is his love to those who fear him.

And as far as sunrise is from sunset,

he has separated us from our sins.

As parents feel for their children,

GOD feels for those who fear him.

He knows us inside and out,

keeps in mind that we're made of dust.

Men and women don't live very long;

like wildflowers they spring up and blossom,

But a storm snuffs them out just as quickly,

leaving nothing to show they were here.

GOD's love, though, is ever and always,

eternally present for all who fear him,

Making everything right for them and their children

as they follow his Covenant ways

and remember to do whatever he said.

PRE-SERMON READING | Matthew 18:21-35

Verses 21-27

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

'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.'

'Because of this, the kingdom of heaven has become like a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents (or 225 tons of gold or silver)¹. And since he could not pay (the debt being equivalent to 164,000 years of daily wages), his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made.

So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' (Which, of course, he could not.)

And out of pity for him (moved by compassion), the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.

Verses 28-35

But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii (or four months wages) and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.'

So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.'

He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.

When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him,

'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?'

And his master moved with anger, delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.

So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.

¹ Snodgrass, 66 and n13 on 639.

INTRODUCTION | Finding the Context

Life in God's kingdom is more about bringing us to maturation than it is about bringing an end. That's what Psalm 103, which Cohen and Lily read for us, sings out, and [our first two parables](#) this Epiphanytide have revealed about living in God's presence, his rule, and reign. There is an end, a judgment of good and evil, a separating of that which is and brings forth beauty and flourishing and that which is putrid and brings decay. But in the in-between, the wheat grows to harvest even as weeds remain. In-between, there is fullness of life with God, in union with God, in his kingdom. In the field of God's kingdom, the intent is for us to mature, to bear a prosperous harvest (a bountiful life), some 100, some 60, some 30 fold, even as such produce grows full amid mixed soil. And so naturally, the question we all have is, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

Okay, maybe that's not the question you are asking, but how about this one; "How do I ensure I have the highest yielding produce?" "Listen," you think, "I'm all in on this God-With-Us, God-For-Us existence, so how do I make sure I get the most out of it, live the most fruitful life?"

This is the question Christians have been asking for millennia, and is essentially what the disciples were asking at the beginning of the chapter, which houses our parable today. Look with me at Matthew 18, starting in verse 1.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus say, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' And calling to him a child, Jesus put the child in the midst of them and said,

'Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.'

Awesome, we want an abundant life in the God-With-Us, God-For-Us world; let's practice a little humility, be a posture of dependence, and have the affection, imagination, curiosity, and trust of a child for her parent, and we'll get what we are after! Easy peasy lemon squeezy, as my child would say. Hold fast with faith to God and what God has and is doing in Jesus, and we'll be all good!

But here is the thing, we're not an only child. In fact, we're a part of a rather abundant family in which we tend to step on each other's toes and generally act like most children do (at least at times) towards their siblings, with rivalry. So, Jesus' answer to our question continues in verse 5.

Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin (stumble), it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

Whoa! That seems a bit dramatic, if I am honest. For, if I am reading Jesus right, he seems to be saying that **the abundance (better yet, effectiveness and fruitfulness) of my life in God's kingdom is not merely a matter of my faith, but how may faith leads me to relate to my sisters and brothers in Jesus?** If the way I interact with these other children (for I too am a child, presumably) causes them to stumble in their childlike trust, imagination, and clinging to our heavenly Father, I better not think too little of relating!

“Listen,” Jesus says in verse 7, “temptations to sin are about as inevitable as rocks in the soil and thorny patches mixed in; so no need to make it worse, and you better watch out if you do!” In fact, it would be better to cut off and cut out anything that causes you to sin by causing those of childlike faith to sin than to keep it all together and get burned by your pride. At least that’s my paraphrase of verses 8-9.

Though it is easy to look down on the seemingly immature, Jesus says that such ones have constant advocates (v. 10) watching out for them who will let the Father know when they’ve wandered off. And listen, it’s the Father’s intent and delight to go after these little ones, these immature ones who find themselves lost at times, and to make sure they don’t wind up in the same spot as those who made them stumble (v. 11-14).

Apparently, the Father is tenacious about his little ones and their livelihood, their fruitfulness, and their restoration. Being childlike in our relation to God our Father, forever young (as the psalmist suggested), is of high importance to our maturation. Ironically enough, we don’t mature by acting like we are. We mature by living out the reality of what we are, children, lost sheep, little ones needing saving and care.

A SLIGHT SHIFT

So the answer to our question shifts a bit. **We start with embracing our immaturity and dependence, and then we have to consider how we cause one another to sin.**

The word in verses 6, 8, and 9 translated as sin, is the same word Jesus used to describe the rocky soil’s reason for unfruitfulness back in chapter 13:21. It is a word that means to stumble, to fall, and thus **fall away from maturity**. So again, what do we do that causes one another to stumble, fall away from maturing into who they are made to be in Jesus?

Here Jesus could have gone in any number of directions. I bet, if you are at all like me, the ideas that pop into your head look like Paul’s list of the work’s of the flesh in Galatians; those divisive and manipulative and selfish manifestations of lack of love, and those culturally affirmed sins of the body. Gossip, slander, lust, drunkenness, rivalries, sexual immorality, sorcery, and the like.

But Jesus doesn’t go there. Instead, starting in verses 15, Jesus elucidates how we cause others to stumble (keep from reaching maturity), by what we hold against one another, and what we loosen for one another.

Read verses 15-17 with me.

HOW WE DEAL WITH OTHER’S SIN

Jesus is not naïve. He knows that even as God’s family members, we will sin against one another. The word for sins in verse 15 is different from verses 6, 8, and 9. It is not a word for causing one to stumble, but rather the word we most associate with the idea of sin. It means to wrong someone, to miss the expected mark in how we relate and treat and consider another. Jesus is well aware that we will wrong one another, wound one another, fail one another. **Yet, such actions are not the stumbling block.** Indeed, they demonstrate our lostness and need for the good shepherd to come to get us; they cause separation from communion and

community. **But Jesus says in verses 15-17 that what will keep a person from maturing is not merely that they commit sins but how we respond to their sin.**

As sisters and brothers who are bound to offend one another and certainly bound to sin against one another, what are we to do to make sure that childlike faith matures? We're to do what the Father does, go after a restoration of relationship full bore in a way that honors the one who has sinned against us (v. 15-20).

And this is the key to our experience of the kingdom life to its fullest potential—how we treat others who “owe” us, those indebted to us. Those who owe us an apology, owe us restitution, owe us gratitude, owe us understanding, those who have taken from us without reciprocation. What we demand of one another, as children of our heavenly Father, has as much to do with how we experience the fullness of the kingdom of God as does our individual faith.

To make sure we get the idea, Jesus concludes this supposed “church discipline” section with these words,

Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For were two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.

The passage is not a text about a prayer meeting or worship service, or a small group. It is a passage about the role we have in helping one another mature into who they are in God, and in turn, our maturation in the kingdom as well.

Matthew 18, verses 15-20 do not outline a process for church discipline; they describe the heart of children of God towards sinners like themselves. A heart that seeks out restoration and shows that they honor the dignity of the sinner (going to him alone), that they understand the propensity of our humanity to make excuses/justify our wrongs (so they take one or two others to help open eyes to reality), and that they know what's at stake and the importance of the sinner to the family (tell it to the church), and that they are willing to start the relationship over at the ground level, without assumption, if it should be required (by treating them as a Gentile and tax collector who were the very ones Jesus was inviting into kingdom life with him). **They looked on the one who sinned against them with empathy, compassion, and determination to see them mature into who they truly are, alongside them.**

Such a way of living together seems impossible. Too much. To show such patient resolve, mercy, forgiveness, and willingness to lay down the debt; seems too much. At least Peter thought so. So he asked what we'd all have asked in that situation, “How many times do I forgive the one who sins against me?” “Until you lose count,” is Jesus' response. Now, with the context all set, we arrive at our parable this morning.

MISSING THE INTENT | A different way to be human

Let me once again start by saying what this parable is not about. This is not a parable about being ungrateful, though gratitude is pivotal to the fruitfulness of faith. This parable is also not about losing our salvation nor earning it either.

The parable of the unforgiving servant is about becoming a different kind of human. It is a parable of relating differently to others because of how God has related to us, and that being the distinguishing feature of experience the “greatest” abundance of life in the kingdom of heaven. It is a parable about binding and loosening and the role we have in experiencing the fullness of what God-With-Us, God-For-Us actually means.

Who the servant is, what he does, and what the king did, and why

A few things about this parable that we need to note before we get to everyone’s question, “What about verse 35?!”

First, Jesus is one sly guy! Look at how he starts the parable. He describes the king as one who wants to settle his accounts with his servants (v. 23), that is, one who kept detailed records of his servants' contributions, distributions, and debts. Pretty much the image most of us already have of God, right? A cosmic accountant who tallies our deposits and withdrawals, our good and our bad, what we contribute to the kingdom, and how we mess it up. It’s okay to admit it; we’ve all pictured (or still do picture) God that way. And indeed, many of our neighbors do.

And so, the parable starts off all straight forward, giving us a glimpse at our own projection of God, and continues in the following scene with the grossly indebted tax farmer. Most likely, that’s what this servant is, a tax farmer. A tax farmer is one who had secured a contract with a sovereign to collect what was required by the king for the maintaining of the crown and kingdom.

He is a tax minister if you will. There are historical records of such persons throughout antiquity that would promise their sovereigns payment in the seemingly astronomical amount of what this person owed. The text says 10,000 talents, which is equivalent to 225 tons of either silver or gold. And depending on which metal was promised, that means somewhere between 164,000 and 220,000 years of daily wages required to be whole.

It's the near absurdity of the debt that requires the king to order this man and his wife and children to be sold into slavery. Such debt would require generation after generation after generation to pay for the father's sins and never really repay them. And while we may squirm at the idea of such consequences, the first listeners would be all for putting what was owed to the tax farmer. After all, this was the letter of the law and a just response to the wrong committed, the promise unfulfilled. The king had every right to demand payment for the king’s livelihood and prosperity. The security and justice, and proper operation of the kingdom depended on such resources, especially resources of this magnitude. The penalty was grave, but so was the offense, and so the requirement was justice.

The response of the tax farmer is not a surprise either. Any one of us in such a desperate situation would plead patience and leniency. But notice what he doesn’t ask for; he doesn’t ask for forgiveness. Reread verse 26,

So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with m, and I will pay you everything.'

The tax farmer asks for more time to make things right, to square things up, to fix it himself. Again, an expected and even acceptable response considering the weight of his mismanagement. Maybe at this point, Jesus' listeners then, and perhaps today, even if only briefly, identify with the servant. On the precipice of losing everything, crying out for the opportunity to get back on track, and not demanding anything but the chance to fulfill the promise we had missed.

And so the king's reply would be a welcomed surprise, one hoped for, even if not expected. The king, in verse 27, looks at the servant with compassion. He recognizes the frailty and vulnerability, and humanness of this man and does not give him what he asked for, but rather more. He forgives him the debt. The text says, *"the master of the servant released him (set him free, freed him to live without the bounds and chains of his failure and his promises) and forgave him his debt"* (v. 27).

Awesome! What a king! What a story! Okay, Peter thinks, I get it. Forgiveness is a big deal, and we should make a big deal out of it. But before Peter can get too far into his thought, Jesus takes the story further.

Rather than going off and celebrating the recovery of life, resurrection from the daily death of slavery, and weight of insurmountable debt still needing to be made whole, **this tax farmer goes back to what he knows, collecting what is owed him.** And he goes about getting what is owed him the way he knows how, through violence (intimidation, passionate pursuit, vigor) and the letter of the law, **leveraging his rights and the others wrongs.**

His actions "greatly distressed" (v. 31) his fellow servants who saw how he was acting, though we don't know if the distress came from his use of violence or their knowledge of his forgiveness. Or maybe both. Perhaps, as "fellow servants," they too had had their time with the king who was settling accounts and experienced similar compassion. Regardless, we can identify with them being disturbed by such actions—though we also identified with the tax farmer just a few moments ago. And then there is the man who the forgiven servant attacks and binds him for his debt. Surely he is a victim of all this, and we begin to see ourselves in him as well. It was such a small offense; surely, it did not deserve such severe treatment.

Yet, nothing in the story indicates that the man who owed 100 denarii (4 months wages) wasn't just as guilty as the one who owed 10,000 talents. After all, he isn't released from the prison, nor his debt absolved, again, at least in the story. So what's happening here?

Listen to the plea of the servant to the tax farmer in verse 28, a plea that echoed his own from verse 26,

'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.'

The man asks the forgiven tax farmer almost the exact same thing he had asked the king; for more time to make things right, a second chance to do better. This is the kind of forgiveness we request and often the kind we demand of others. We want to make things right, and we want those who wronged us to make it right as well. We still want what is owed, and we think restoration comes through repayment.

Like the king, the forgiven servant doesn't give the man what he wants, but unlike the king, he takes what he is owed. **And by taking what he is owed, especially in the manner he does, he finds himself bound and indebted once more.**

Notice what the king says to the man when the way he treated his fellow servant comes to light. Verses 32-33,

Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. [simply because you asked] And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?'

So says the king, I dismissed what was owed to me, what you owed to me, which was everything and more of what was owed to you. Everything that man owed you (his 100 denarii) was really mine because of your debt. But beyond that, at the heart of the matter, I forgave because of compassion, because I saw your vulnerability, fragility, and humanity. Because I saw who you really were, a little one in need of rescue, a lost sheep. **And yet you demand what is no longer demanded of you because you lack such compassion. You use my law to demand what I did not demand and do so without mercy. Because you have refused forgiveness, to be free of the debt by the way you are demanding it upon others, you'll find it placed right back upon you.**

Where once the king was moved by compassion (v. 27), now he is moved by anger (v. 34), not because of what the tax farmer owed the king—that had been forgiven, the reason for the anger is not the tremendous debt (the sin itself) but the way he treated his fellow servant; what he bound upon his fellow servant and failed to loosen. He chose to bind the debt of the other on him, rather than loosen his life; which is the very thing Jesus said is in our power to do (v. 18-20).

Kenneth Bailey said it best, “our relationships with God and with our neighbors are closely tied.”² In the story, we come to see the king in a way we didn't expect. He is no cosmic accountant keeping books on us (as the Psalmist said in 103, our sin is removed as far as the sunrise is from the sunset), and yet we and the tax farmer live as if collecting on debts is the way the kingdom operates. And in so doing, keep others from maturing and fail to experience the maturity we seek.

The only basis for the servant's condemnation is his own refusal to let “grace have its way through him. His insistence on binding another's debts upon them in the name of his own right to life...cut himself off from ever knowing the joy of grace in him.”³

This may be a bit of an overstatement, but in a way that is meant to get us to consider something, “There is,” it seems, “only one unpardonable sin, and that is to withhold pardon from others. The only thing that keeps us out of the joy of” a new life through forgiveness, “is to join the unforgiving servant in his refusal,” to forgive his brother “from his heart,” the very place of Jesus' entanglement with us.

We don't come to such maturity easily. We are more like the tax farmer in our relation to those who sin against us than we'd probably care to admit. Perhaps our shared propensity is why Jesus taught us to pray,

*forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
(Matt. 6:12)*

Let's pray

² Bailey, 124.

³ Adapted from Capon, 199.

COMMUNION READING | John 15:1-17

'I am the Real Vine and my Father is the Farmer...Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can't bear fruit by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can't bear fruit unless you are joined with me.

I'm the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me, and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant.

Separated, you can't produce a thing.

Anyone who separates from me is deadwood, gathered up and thrown on the bonfire. But if you make yourselves at home with me and my words are at home in you, you can be sure that whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon. This is how my Father shows who he is—when you produce fruit, when you mature as my disciples.

I've loved you the way my Father has loved me.

Make yourselves at home in my love.'

I've told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy wholly mature.'

This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends. You are my friends when you do the things I command you. I'm no longer calling you servants because servants don't understand what their master is thinking and planning. No, I've named you friends because I've let you in on everything I've heard from the Father.

You didn't choose me, remember; I chose you, and put you in this world to bear fruit that won't spoil. As fruit bearers, whatever you ask the Father in relation to me, he gives you.

But remember the root command: Love one another."

CONGREGATIONAL CONFESSION

We confess that a true, complete, and abundant life comes from Christ in us. Yet we also confess that we often bind on others what has been loosed for us, causing them to stumble and keeping us from experiencing all You have gifted. Thank you for having compassion on us, heavenly Father, for remembering that we come from dust. With ready hearts, we receive the Word of God, who became flesh and dwelt among us. With ready hearts, we receive his body broken, and blood poured out because of our sin. With ready hearts, we receive and make ourselves at home, in the love of a Friend, who is our Savior. May we love as we are loved. And forgive as we have been forgiven. In Jesus Name. Amen.