

Forgive us our debts...

Twenty-second Sunday After Trinity
(From the Gospel: *St. Matthew xviii. 21.*)

21 Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? **22** Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven. **23** Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants. **24** And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents. **25** But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. **26** The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. **27** Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt. **28** But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellowservants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest. **29** And his fellowservant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. **30** And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt. **31** So when his fellowservants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done. **32** Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: **33** Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee? **34** And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. **35** So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.

Owing anything to anyone has never been an experience anyone cherishes. “Debt” is hardly a cozy word, but it is one that has forced its way into our lives these days on every level. We hear endlessly of the national debt, and have given up even trying to comprehend the thought of multiplied trillions of dollars owed by America to someone, somewhere. Fixing such a dilemma is so utterly improbable that the whole nation is filled with uneasiness. Added to this are smaller debts which are no more pleasurable, whether business debt, or “consumer debt”, which affect most of us directly and personally. Debt is a hard master, and one of our own creation, which drives us onward with cruel compulsion, demanding satisfaction. Whether necessity has forced the debt, or merely recklessness and foolishness, once it is in place, it seems to rule our lives without mercy.

The only hope of relief is either to pay it off somehow, or for the conditions of the debt to be altered by those to whom we are indebted, or for someone to come along and assist us purely out of kindness. If the debt is very large, and our reasons for accumulating it particularly inexcusable, and the means to repay it nonexistent, rescue or forgiveness of the obligation are especially undeserved and unexpected. Curiously, such generous treatment places us in another state of tremendous debt, for we cannot help but feel that we owe an enormous amount to one who shows us such unexpected and unmerited kindness. Furthermore, with what sort of currency can one possibly repay a great act of mercy?

Let's look at what today's parable symbolizes. The *king* is God who will some day, at the Last Judgment, *take account of his servants*, of each and every one who inhabits His earth. The *one [who] was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents* is indeed each one of us. But how can this be? The debt spoken of is enormous. How can we be thus indebted to God? For two reasons: for what He has already done for us as our Creator and Sustainer, and for what we have already done to Him, as it were, in response.

All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee (Book of Common Prayer, p. 73, and I Chron. xxix.14). *All things* leaves nothing out, whether life, or breath, or health, or possessions, or peace of mind, or children, or house and home, profession... *all things*. All of us live on "borrowed time", borrowed from the one who gave it. We are tenants, as it were, to a landlord who owns it all. Even if we never, ever acknowledge the One from whom *all things* issue, we nevertheless live totally at His mercy and at His expense, for, as Scripture says:

-... *he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.* (Matt. 5:45)

-*The earth is the LORD'S, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein...*(Ps. 24:1)

-*Behold, all souls are mine...* (Ezek. 18:4)

We owe Him everything merely by dint of living always by His mercy and His permission.

But we also owe Him because of what we have done *to* Him: our sins. Whether we rightly understand them in this fashion, or whether we completely fail to do so, our sins are effectively our reply to His goodness in so ordering our existence. Our sins are an affront to His role as Creator, Sustainer, Provider, and Giver of all. Each sin constitutes in itself, as it were, the very worst possible response we can render as those who are living solely at the good graces of Another, One whose goodness, kindness, patience, and mercy are limitless.

We are doubly in debt, then, as sinners dwelling on this earth, both because of what we have been given, and the manner in which we have responded.

Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt...

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

In spite of the size of the debt we each and all owe to God, His response has been to assume the entire weight of the debt Himself, through the death of Christ for our sins. The enormity of such an act of mercy — the parable goes on to teach — should be more than a sufficient motivator for us who have received such a pardon to extend it to others whose debts to us, as real as they may be, are far, far less in size and significance. Since we are all of a kind --i.e., those who are deeply

indebted to God-- we should hasten to show mercy to all who truly desire our forgiveness for whatever offenses they have committed against us.

The servant forgiven of such a large obligation should have been overcome with the goodness of the king, and displayed his gratitude by freely and gladly forgiving his fellow-servant, and being prepared to do so *seventy times seven*, in other words, for the rest of his life! The actual dimension of the forgiveness offered us in Christ should instill in us a state of unending indebtedness to the One who cancelled what we owed Him. All that is left us following such a great rescue is... worship, praise, love, and service to Him forever and ever.

We must be realistic: our Heavenly Father is the only One to whom we might hope to appeal for extraordinary kindness when we are hopelessly enmeshed in such a debt. How awful it is to be indebted to man, in contrast to God! As King David cried, *Please let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for His mercies are great; but do not let me fall into the hand of man* (2 Sam 24:14). The servant in the parable refused to accept his fellow-servant's plea for pardon: *he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat... and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt.*

The servant's wickedness in the face of such goodness brought the severest of penalties: *And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him.* His position after demonstrating such ingratitude toward the king's mercy is infinitely worse than it was even when it was first discovered that he owed the king *ten thousand talents*. Not only is he commanded *to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made*, but he will be subject to torment -- he will have to endure virtually unending misery, shame, and punishment in like proportion to the greatness of his sin, a fate that the king had offered to instantly cancel in its entirety! All that he owed will now be forcefully exacted of him. His position is hopeless.

“Dear God, we pray, deliver us from hardness of heart! Whenever we are tempted to deal harshly with others, and to be stingy with Christian mercy, remind us once again of the greatness of our sin, and of the great pardon we --*we personally*-- have received.”

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.