

Parables Session 9

Introductory Comments

1. Only one of Jesus' parables is about a secular king (whereas in rabbinic parables, kings appear in roughly half). While the empire of God is a key theme in Jesus' teaching, kings are not the typical illustration of how to model that empire. Given how the king in this parable acts, and how kings tend to act in general, Jesus' reluctance is understandable. At the end of the day, Jesus' view of God does not comport with imperial ambitions.
2. This parable appears in a wider section of Matthew concerned with church order. It is the fourth of five sermons or exchanges, each of which ends with the formula: "And so, when Jesus had finished this instruction, he took leave of Galilee..."
3. In order to link the parable to Peter's question that is asked immediately prior (about how many times to forgive), Matthew has constructed an introduction that says: "This is why Heaven's imperial rule should be compared to..." (18:23). As an interpretive tip, remember that to say "compared to" does not necessarily imply similitude, but could also point to difference. Matthew has also constructed the last line (18:35) as his own interpretation of what most scholars believe to be the original parable (which ends at 18:34).
4. The way Matthew uses and interprets the parable has long troubled interpreters. After Jesus demands an abundance of forgiveness from Peter, he then tells a parable in which the king (after forgiving a large debt) turns around and punishes a slave after his first offense. What do we do with that? Since for Matthew the "king" is God (see 18:35), we are left with some big questions: Is God's forgiveness conditional? Can it be taken away? Is God reliable? Is the ending punishment imposed, or allowed?
5. The "Unforgiving Slave" is another example of a parable that seems to say one thing at first blush, but on deeper reading says much more. A traditional reading is that "we should be forgiving like the king (i.e. God), or else..." But as we have seen, parables tend to swim in deeper pools than the shallows of black and white. Our goal for this session, then, is to seek the gray water and consider what this parable might be saying about God, the world, and the structures within which we all live.

Questions

Read Matthew 18:21-35, the Unforgiving Slave

1. **From the outset (18:21-22), we are alerted to the fact that this parable is enmeshed in hyperbole. How do we know?** Peter's question about how many times we should forgive, and Jesus' answer are the first clues. Peter thinks he's being generous by asking if "seven times" is sufficient (that more than doubles the customary three times practiced within Judaism of that period). But then Jesus responds with a number that can either mean "77" or "70 x 7" (aka 490). Now for the literalists among us, this discrepancy can be confusing. "Wait a second, Jesus! Is it 77 or 490?? We gotta know how many times exactly!!" But in the end, is not about math. It's not about figuring it out and following the rules – it's about grace and love. Either way, the number Jesus says is meant to mean "Peter, the numbers are not the point. You're asking the wrong question." And then he goes into the parable.
2. **How does the parable itself continue the hyperbole?** The amount owed to the king by the slave is "10,000 talents." This is not only a large amount – it is an ABSURD amount! A single

talent was the equivalent of 15 years' wage in first-century Palestine. The amount this servant owes is the equivalent of 150,000 years' worth of income. Also, "10,000" is the largest unit of numbering in ancient Greek (*myrioi*, from which we get *myriad*). By way of comparison, the historian Josephus writes that the entire tribute demanded of the Jews after Pompey's conquest of Judea was 10,000 talents.

3. **How is the king portrayed in this initial encounter with the slave?** The king demonstrates unbelievable, unreal, unheard of, forgiveness. Initially, it's an amazing example. **How is the king portrayed in the end?** We may see the king as either justified or ruthless - the parable itself doesn't tell us which. It just lays out before us the capacity of the king to move from absurd forgiveness to harsh judgment.
4. **What can we say about the amount the second slave owes the first slave?** You may be expecting that 100 denarii is a small amount. Not so. A single denarius was a day's wage, thus the amount the first slave is owed is just over three months' wages, which is not insignificant. Yet when compared to the 10,000 talents that he owes the king it seems next to nothing. **How is the unforgiving slave apprehended?** His fellow slaves reported him to the king, and as a result of his unforgiving attitude, the king reneges on his offer of forgiveness, and the servant is sent away to be punished.
5. **Setting Matthew's interpretation aside (18:35) and assuming that the king represents a worldly king, what commentary does this parable make on the capacity of worldly systems and structures to operate as God operates?** Ultimately, it is saying that worldly systems of client-patron, honor-shame just can't do it. The parable sets up two traps to make that commentary. The first pertains to the Jewish expectation of the Messiah arriving as a worldly king. The parable shows how unstable, capricious, and treacherous the worldly structures of authority are, where the restrictive hierarchy of patron/client, honor/shame leave most out in the cold. Within the worldly, authoritarian system of that time, there was no room for real grace, and no capacity for real forgiveness. The second trap pertains to the original audience and to us as hearers, especially those who disapprove of the first slave's action toward his fellow slave. If we cheer when the other slaves report the first slave to the king (who then turns him over to the torturers) we (and they) have done exactly the same thing the first slave did. In a brilliant fashion, the parable catches everyone in evil - not intentional evil, but implicit, systemic evil. Even if the messiah came and forgave all debts, the imperial worldly system of which the messiah is a part would not allow the process to go forward. How does the old saying go: "If Jesus came preaching and teaching today, we'd crucify him again." A whole other system is needed, a system outside empire, outside honor and shame, outside patron-client, outside royal power.
6. **What are some take-aways from this parable? What does the parable provoke in you?** One thing that stands out for me is the idea that if we have to ask how many times to forgive, then we don't understand what forgiveness is. Jesus wants us to move away from this outdated and false paradigm of quantification and the question of whether a person deserves so much forgiveness. If we are truly in relationship with God, a relationship built on love, then we will forgive as God forgives, not as humans forgive; which is to say, with conditions and a calculator. Love doesn't work that way. And if we find that we refuse to forgive as God does, then we, too, may find ourselves tormented our whole lives over debts that can never be repaid. I also appreciate how, in similar fashion as the parable of the Shrewd Manager, Jesus catches us all in the net of implication. None of us is in the clear; we are all caught up in the systemic evil of this world. And only when we put aside rules-following self-righteousness as our highest aspiration, only when we see how dirty our hands are, can the gritty, real work of forgiveness and reconciliation begin.

****For next session, read Lk 14:16-24; Thomas 64 "The Dinner Party"*

Also, we will be adding three more weeks to the Parables Bible Study!

Please add the following to your schedules:

Session 11: The Laborers in the Vineyard, Matthew 20:1-16

Session 12: The Widow and the Judge, Luke 18:1-8

Session 13: The Rich Man and Lazarus, Luke 16:19-31