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JUSTIFICATION AS DESCRIBED IN THE  
PARABLE OF THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT,  
MATTHEW 18:23-35

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A Thesis Presented to the Faculty  
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,  
Department of Exegetical Theology  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Divinity

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by

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**Justification: Matt. 18:23-35**



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CHAPTER I

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When Jesus was asked the reason for speaking in parables, He answered His disciples, "The mystery of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but for those outside everything is in parables."<sup>1</sup> This answer was both a statement of judgment upon those outside the kingdom and the assurance of a gift of God for those within the kingdom. The answer divides Jesus into groups to interpret the parables into distinct groups. He follows and His rejection. The parables have specific and different functions for each of these groups. The interpretations given them will differ widely.

For those who receive Christ the parables are illustrative and helpful in understanding and finding the truth. This unique meaning of parables is found among Christian people because of their acceptance of Christ. It is the *parabolos* that has been revealed and given to His disciples.<sup>2</sup> He, the King of the Kingdom, is the key to the understanding of the parables. For those who have

<sup>1</sup> Matt. 13:11.  
<sup>2</sup> John 1:12.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Rules for the Interpretation of Parables

When Jesus was asked His reason for speaking in parables, He answered His disciples, "The mystery of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but for those outside everything is in parables."<sup>1</sup> This answer was both a statement of judgment upon those outside His kingdom and the assurance of a gift of God for those within the kingdom. His answer divides those who attempt to interpret the parables into distinct groups, His followers and His rejectors. The parables have a specific and different function for each of these groups. The interpretations given them will differ widely.

For those who receive Christ the parables are illustrative and helpful in understanding and finding the truth. This unique meaning of parables is found among Christian people because of their acceptance of Christ. He is the *μυστήριον* that has been revealed and given to His disciples.<sup>2</sup> He, the King of the Kingdom, is the Key to the understanding of the parables. For those who know

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<sup>1</sup>Matt. 4:11.

<sup>2</sup>Col. 1:27.



Christ, His purpose, His nature, His intent, the parables become teaching sections which clear up many aspects of the kingdom and present it in beautiful terms easily understood and remembered. Christ spoke His parables so that His followers would have such an understanding.

Even though the Christian has in His hands the Key to the understanding of the parables, there are certain rules of their interpretation which must be followed in order to find their message. The most basic rule is that the interpreter carefully consider the immediate context of the parable.<sup>3</sup> Even though a parable might suggest many interpretations when considered by itself, the number of possible interpretations is almost always limited by what precedes and follows. Sometimes this context is given by Christ Himself. At other times the inspired writer states an introduction or conclusion to a particular parable. There is always some connection with the surrounding material, for a parable is not intended to be the first and only source of a doctrine.<sup>4</sup> It is rather an illustration of something which is already known or which has just been presented.<sup>5</sup> Therefore it is very important that the interpreter carefully consider the context of the parable under consideration.

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<sup>3</sup>Richard C. Trench, Notes on the Parables of our Lord (Westwood, N. J.: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1953), p. 39.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 40f.



A second principle for the proper interpretation of a parable is that the interpretation must be easy rather than forced.<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that all of the parables are so shallow that anyone can readily find exactly what they intend to express. That this is not true has already been shown in Christ's own stated purpose for the parables, that is, to hide the truth from some. The discovery of the meaning might not come easy, but once it has been discovered it may be tested by determining how easily it fits all the parts of a parable. A proper interpretation will require no forcing of any point in order to make the interpretation hold.<sup>7</sup>

With these two principles the interpreter may begin to make an honest search for the point that a specific parable is trying to make. They will guide him to a proper distinction between what is essential to the meaning of the parable and what is merely incidental. That this distinction be made is of the utmost importance. The job of the interpreter now becomes the answering of the question: How much of this parable is to be taken as significant?<sup>8</sup> There have been those who have attempted to answer the question by stating that a parable makes only one point and that whatever else is found in it is

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 31.



of no significance.<sup>9</sup> There have been others who insist that every detail of the parable has its counterpart in some greater truth.<sup>10</sup> The principles of interpretation that have already been stated indicate that neither of these extreme positions need always hold. The context might suggest that the parable expresses more than one central truth. On the other hand, trying to find meaning for every detail would likely involve a great amount of forcing in the interpretation.

The wiser course is to choose a position between these two extremes. Surely the parable will express some central truth and this will likely be indicated by the context or by Christ's own application. Once that central truth is found, the interpreter must use his judgment to determine which of the surrounding details are also pertinent. He must not assume that anything in the parable is non-essential, except when by holding it fast as essential, the unity of the whole is marred and troubled.<sup>11</sup> Archbishop Trench sums up the guidelines for this choice of pertinent detail as follows:

Much must be left to good sense, to spiritual tact, to that reverence for the word of God, which will show itself sometimes in refusing curiosities of interpretation, no less than at other times in demanding a distinct spiritual meaning for the

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 37.



words which are before it.<sup>12</sup>

Always, extreme care must be exercised to draw out of Scripture its meaning rather than attempting to thrust into Scripture that meaning which appeals to the interpreter. Making the parables comply with the literal portions of Scripture will usually guard against such abuse.<sup>13</sup>

#### Application of These Principles....

In applying these principles to this study of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:23-25), attention must first be given to its context. The opening words of the parable makes this especially necessary. The parable begins with the words  $\delta\iota\alpha\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\tau\omicron$  in order to tie it with what has gone before. The parable belongs to the subject matter of the preceding section.<sup>14</sup> Jesus had spoken of the power given to the Church to "loose" and "bind" sins. As Peter was contemplating what it means to forgive the brother, he asks Jesus about the number of times a man is expected to forgive an erring brother. Jesus answers that forgiveness is to be unlimited. As many times as a brother sins, so many times must he be forgiven. Jesus then continues His answer with the

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 42f.

<sup>14</sup>A. Nebe, Die Evangelischen Perikopen des Kirchenjahres (Third Revised edition; Wiesbaden: Julius Neidner, 1887), III, 397.



parable. It, too, is a part of this discourse of the necessity of brother forgiving brother. So it is that the parable begins with the words *διὰ τοῦτο*. Lenski points out that these two Greek words mean to say: "on account of the obligation that we are constantly to forgive."<sup>15</sup> Jesus speaks these words to the end "that Peter may understand why the Lord has said, 'Till seventy times seven.'"<sup>16</sup>

There is a statement of application at the end of the parable which also serves as context and guides the interpreter to a proper understanding of the parable. In that sentence, as in the material which came before the parable, stress is laid on brotherly forgiveness. But in the sentence of application Jesus speaks specifically of the activity of His Father as if to underline that as an important aspect of the parable, too.

The context then indicates that the central message of the parable has to do with forgiveness, especially the forgiveness between brothers but also the forgiveness of God. In the exposition of the parable, the writer will attempt to discuss both of these central emphases; but special attention will be given to God's act of forgiveness as it is described here. While the writer is well aware that this is not the central emphasis, he is nevertheless of the opinion that the description of God's forgiveness

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<sup>15</sup>R. C. H. Lenski, The Gospel Selections of the Ancient Church (Columbus, Ohio: Lutheran Book Concern, 1936), p. 892.

<sup>16</sup>Trench, op. cit., p. 152.



does not fall into the area of insignificant detail to the parable. Trench also states this clearly:

The purpose of . . . the parable is to make clear that when God calls on a member of His kingdom to forgive, He does not call on him to renounce a right, but that He has now no right to exercise in the matter; for having himself asked for and accepted forgiveness, he has implicitly pledged himself to show it; and it is difficult to imagine how any amount of didactic instruction could have brought home this truth with at all the force and conviction of this parable. . . .<sup>17</sup>

Man's forgiveness of his brother always falls into the context of God's forgiving him. This is also the case in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. Christian obligation is something more than mere moral obligation. Its reason and motivation is found in God's forgiving act.<sup>18</sup> That act is also described in the parable and is, indeed, an important emphasis of the parable. That act will be the subject of this paper.

Luther also pays great attention to this part of the parable in his exposition of it. He is convinced that the parable has a dual central message.<sup>19</sup> In speaking of the two things that the parable points out, he says that it first tells how God has compassion on a servant and

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid. Italics, the writer's.

<sup>18</sup>Thomas Richey, The Parables of the Lord Jesus according to St. Matthew (New York: E. & J. B. Young and Co., 1888), p. 214.

<sup>19</sup>Martin Luther, Evangelien-Auslegung, herausgegeben von Erwin Milhaupt (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1939), II, 624.



forgives him, showing how God is minded toward His servants; secondly, it tells that the servant should have been compassionate toward his fellow-servant, showing that one must be forgiving.<sup>20</sup> These words of Luther are evidence that he found more there than an object lesson of brother forgiving brother. First, as a matter of fact, he found the message of God's forgiveness.

This paper will then deal with a valid emphasis of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. Nor will the emphasis of this paper be unique with this writer. It is an emphasis that has not escaped the writings of many interpreters.

#### The Problem

The specific problem for which this paper will try to find a solution is one posed by those men who find in Jesus little more than a teacher of morality. These are largely those men who "deny the central Gospel truth that men are justified by faith alone, and through their man-made theories of atonement paganize the Christian religion."<sup>21</sup> In working out their own theories, some men have become so crass as to say that the idea of salvation through grace is an invention of the Apostle Paul, and is not found in the

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>John Theodore Mueller, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1934), p. 27.



teachings of Christ. Many religions, which claim to be Christian, have so emphasized Christ's teachings on godly living as to imply that Christ said nothing more. It is evident that the writings of the Apostle Paul, notably his Epistle to the Romans, speak at length on God's gracious forgiving act. It is also evident that Christ did not speak at such lengths on the same subject. Yet, this writer is convinced that the concept of justification by grace is not peculiar to the writings of Paul.

The questions, then, that this writer posed for himself as he made his study were: Does Jesus in this parable describe God's forgiving act of declaring a man righteous? If so, does He describe it as something different than that which Paul describes?

### Conclusions

The conclusions to which the writer has come as the result of his study are that Jesus very definitely describes the act of justification in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. Secondly, the writer finds that Jesus describes that act as Paul describes it, except for the fact that Jesus makes no explicit reference to Himself as the One for whose sake a man is declared just. If it is borne in mind that Christ Himself is speaking the parable and that He is speaking it to those whom He had been teaching about His mission on earth, His failure to point to Himself as its cause is not so strange.



## Definition of Terms

One term used by the writer needs to be defined exactly in order to avoid any confusion. That term is: "Justification." When that term is used in the title of this paper and in the paper itself, the writer intends it to mean subjective justification. The writer is not trying to say that Christ in this parable describes the merit which He has gained for the entire world. Rather the writer intends to say that Jesus describes the "act of God by which He removes from the believer the sentence of condemnation to which he is subject because of his sin, releases him from his guilt, and ascribes to him the merit of Christ."<sup>22</sup> That act of God is named "Subjective Justification" by our Lutheran Dogmaticians.<sup>23</sup> The above definition will apply to the use of the term "Justification" in this paper.

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 367.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.



## CHAPTER II

### EVERY MAN STANDS IN NEED OF JUSTIFICATION BEFORE GOD

#### The Parable Speaks of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus states immediately in the parable (Matt. 18:23-35) that He is talking about the Kingdom of Heaven. This particular term is one which is found exclusively in Matthew's Gospel account, occurring there thirty-three times.<sup>1</sup> Quite often it is named as the subject of a parable or similitude. So, for example, Christ compares the Kingdom of Heaven to a man who sowed good seed in his field,<sup>2</sup> a grain of mustard seed,<sup>3</sup> leaven,<sup>4</sup> a hidden treasure,<sup>5</sup> a merchant seeking pearls,<sup>6</sup> and a net.<sup>7</sup> In the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, Jesus says that this Kingdom of Heaven is like a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. Since the subject matter of these parables

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph Henry Thayer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (Corrected Edition; New York: American Book Company, 1889), p. 97.

<sup>2</sup>Matt. 13:24.

<sup>3</sup>Matt. 13:31.

<sup>4</sup>Matt. 13:33.

<sup>5</sup>Matt. 13:44.

<sup>6</sup>Matt. 13:45.

<sup>7</sup>Matt. 13:47.



and similitudes differs, it becomes evident that Jesus is not trying to describe this Kingdom in its entirety in every one of His discourses, but, instead, is describing one aspect or characteristic of that Kingdom in each case. This is also true of the last verses of the eighteenth chapter of Matthew's Gospel. The incident which this parable relates is a happening that takes place in the Kingdom of Heaven. The parable does not describe the kingdom in its entirety but the actions of the king illustrate an aspect of it.<sup>8</sup> Lenski says of this kingdom that it is "the heavenly rule of God's grace here on earth through Word and Sacrament and His heavenly rule of glory above."<sup>9</sup> Most often the word "Kingdom" in New Testament usage does not refer to an area over which a king rules but refers instead to the rule or reign itself.<sup>10</sup> Since this Kingdom is described as a heavenly Kingdom, the parable obviously talks about God's rule. Scripture names heaven as God's abode,<sup>11</sup> speaks of God looking down from heaven,<sup>12</sup> and reports that God spoke from heaven.<sup>13</sup> Conversely, the

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<sup>8</sup>Alan Hugh McNeile, The Gospel according to St. Matthew (London: Macmillan and Co., 1949), p. 268.

<sup>9</sup>R. C. H. Lenski, The Gospel Selections of the Ancient Church (Columbus, Ohio: Lutheran Book Concern, 1936), p. 892.

<sup>10</sup>Thayer, op. cit., pp. 96f.

<sup>11</sup>Ecc1. 5:2.

<sup>12</sup>ps. 14:2.

<sup>13</sup>Matt. 3:17.



term "Heaven" is sometimes used as a kind of synonym for God. When the prodigal son returned to his home he said that he had sinned against heaven.<sup>14</sup> Through that terminology he is saying that he sinned against God. Such a use would indicate that the term "Kingdom of Heaven" can be used interchangeably with the term "Kingdom of God." Furthermore, in the parallel sections to the passages in Matthew cited above, the other Synoptics use the term "Kingdom of God" where Matthew uses "Kingdom of Heaven." This would surely indicate that there is no basic difference between the two terms. When Jesus says that this parable is about the Kingdom of Heaven, He is saying that it deals with God's rule.

Lenski is also correct when he says that this kingdom is God's rule "of grace here on earth."<sup>15</sup> The whole mission of Christ on earth shows that God's rule is a gracious rule. The content of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant also points to God's grace very strongly. God's rule is certainly a rule of grace. Furthermore, God's rule surely involves the people of this earth. One cannot speak of a rule of God unless there are some subjects involved. God cannot be King if He has no dominion. When Jesus speaks to people about God's Kingdom, He involves these people in that Kingdom as God's subjects. So when the Kingdom of Heaven is described

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<sup>14</sup>Luke 15:21.

<sup>15</sup>Lenski, op. cit., p. 892.



as a man sowing seed, there is also a field involved.<sup>16</sup> When the Kingdom is described as leaven, there are loaves of bread involved.<sup>17</sup> When the Kingdom is described as a net, there are fish of every description involved.<sup>18</sup> In the parable under consideration, the Kingdom is described as a king taking accounts and there are servants involved. One can never refer to God's Kingdom without involving people. Certainly, therefore, this Kingdom of Heaven, which is named, must be God's gracious rule here on earth. The parable will tell about a thing which happens as God rules through His grace.

#### The Picture of a "King" Is Used to Describe God.

There are several things about the parable which indicate that the king spoken of was an absolute monarch. All of his subjects, whether great or small, are called  $\delta\omicron\upsilon\lambda\omicron\iota$ . He had sole authority over their destinies, being able to sell them into slavery or throw them into jail. Jesus could hardly be drawing the picture of such an absolute monarch from the political picture in Palestine. However, such harsh and tyrannical action was very common among the Assyrian or Babylonian monarchs.<sup>19</sup> As a matter of

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<sup>16</sup>Matt. 13:24.

<sup>17</sup>Matt. 13:33.

<sup>18</sup>Matt. 13:47.

<sup>19</sup>Ienski, op. cit., p. 894.



fact, the threat of selling the man and his family into bondage because of his debt seems to indicate that the picture was taken from Oriental monarchies.<sup>20</sup> During the exile periods of the Old Testament, the Jews had become well acquainted with such kings and their actions. They had witnessed the absolute monarchies of Egypt and Babylon. Thus the picture which Jesus uses would not have seemed strange to His hearers because of their acquaintance with Scriptures and with the history of their people. It might be that the qualifications of this king also fit the Roman monarch in certain instances, though there is no evidence that he enacted this kind of legislation over Palestine through his representatives.<sup>21</sup> Most likely, Jesus borrows the picture of the king from an Oriental monarchy of which His audience would have known through what had been passed on to them in historical records.

Not much emphasis should be placed on the word ἄνθρωπος, so as to make this king the Incarnate Christ.<sup>22</sup> The fact that ἄνθρωπος is used in connection with βασιλεύς does not mean that Jesus was trying to emphasize the fact that this king was an actual man, either in the parable or

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<sup>20</sup>Richard C. Trench, Notes on the Parables of our Lord (Westwood, N. J.: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1953), p. 155.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>A. Nebe, Die Evangelischen Perikopen des Kirchenjahres (Third revised edition; Wiesbaden: Julius Niedner, 1887), III, 398.



in that which the parable represents. Ἄνθρωπος is often joined to another substantive in this manner and in such cases the meaning of ἄνθρωπος holds no dominant position.<sup>23</sup> So, for example, Jesus speaks of a merchant, naming him an ἄνθρωπος ἔμπορος.<sup>24</sup> The emphasis is on the job of this person, not on the fact that he was a man. This particular method of designating a position or characteristic is likely carried over from the Old Testament where a eunuch is called an עֲרֹמָה שִׂינִי,<sup>25</sup> and a priest is called an לֵוִיִּם שִׂינִי.<sup>26</sup> Matthew, quoting Jesus, simply uses the same idiom. Because of this, Richey is in error when he assumes that the king is described as ἄνθρωπος βασιλεύς because Jesus intends to point to His own person.<sup>27</sup> Certainly, what God does in His grace can never be divorced from either the person or work of Christ, but the terminology here used does not point specifically to Christ.

On the contrary, the designation is intended to describe God the Father.<sup>28</sup> There are two things which particularly point to this fact. The first of them is that in another

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<sup>23</sup>Thayer, op. cit., p. 46.

<sup>24</sup>Matt. 13:45.

<sup>25</sup>Jer. 38:7.

<sup>26</sup>Lev. 21:9.

<sup>27</sup>Thomas Richey, The Parables of the Lord Jesus according to St. Matthew (New York: E. & J. B. Young and Co., 1888),

<sup>28</sup>Nebe, op. cit., p. 398.



usage of the same terminology the king surely represents God the Father.<sup>29</sup> The same words occur in the story of the marriage Feast of the king's son.<sup>30</sup> In that story, the King's Son is Christ and so the King Himself must certainly be God the Father. A second reason for supposing that Christ is here speaking of His Father is found in the last verse of the parable under consideration. There Jesus says that the action of this king parallels the action of His Father in the same situation. This leaves little doubt that Jesus is using the picture of an Oriental king to describe His Father, not Himself.

#### The Term "Servant" Is Used to Describe Sinful Man.

The parable speaks of the subjects of the king as δούλῳ. That designation suggests that the subjects spoken of might have been laborers who were owned by masters, people without any of the rights and privileges of free men. But this conclusion is not necessarily true. The word δούλῳ is sometimes used in classical Greek to depict an overseer who is under the king in authority.<sup>31</sup> Thus δούλῳ might describe a nobleman, rather than an actual slave. The circumstances of the parable suggest that the first

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<sup>29</sup>D. Robert Kübel, Exegetisch-Homiletisches Handbuch zum Evangelium des Matthäus (Nördlingen: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1889), p. 345.

<sup>30</sup>Matt. 22:2.

<sup>31</sup>Nebe, op. cit., p. 398.



servant brought to the king is such an overseer. The first servant is not, as in other parables, a simple steward of his master's property, but the satrap of a mighty kingdom.<sup>32</sup> Lenski says of these,

Here  $\delta\omicron\upsilon\lambda\omicron\iota$  are not "slaves" in the ordinary sense. These are grand satraps, the king's retainers and lords who rule his various provinces. In a sense they are indeed the king's slaves, for this Oriental ruler holds absolute sway, and even the highest nobles in the realm are thus his slaves, absolutely subject to his will and his power. That he is dealing with such persons we see from the vast sum which the first  $\delta\omicron\upsilon\lambda\omicron\varsigma$  owed the king. Each satrap had to pay the king the revenues of his province; these sums were not small by any means.<sup>33</sup>

The man who was brought to the king is rightly called a  $\delta\omicron\upsilon\lambda\omicron\varsigma$  because that term adequately describes his relationship to the monarch. Yet he was not an ordinary person and certainly not a common slave. He was an official to whose management the king had entrusted his land and its revenues.<sup>34</sup>

Such a use of the term  $\delta\omicron\upsilon\lambda\omicron\varsigma$  also describes man's relationship to God. Everyone who finds himself under God's rule has no authority of his own. God in His supreme majesty is independent of anything outside Himself and is absolutely sovereign in Himself.<sup>35</sup> Saint Paul says of Him, "From him

<sup>32</sup>Richey, op. cit., p. 206.

<sup>33</sup>Lenski, op. cit., p. 893.

<sup>34</sup>Richey, op. cit., p. 205.

<sup>35</sup>John Theodore Mueller, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1934), p. 170.



and through him and to him are all things."<sup>36</sup> Any man, when compared to such absolute authority, is rightly called a δούλος. Yet the fact that a man is named δούλος does not imply that he is also a slave of his fellow-man. His position in life may be very high or very low. He may be the satrap of a mighty kingdom or a gardener with meager wages. His comparative position in relation to other men is not described by the term δούλος. Yet before God he is always a δούλος as compared to a King. Thus Christ uses very appropriate terms to describe men in their relationship to God. They are like δούλοι before an *ἐνθρονος βασιλεύς*.

#### The Specific Occasion is a Looking At the Accounts

Carrying on the picture of the dealings of a monarch with those under him, Jesus speaks of the king taking account with his servants. If the servant brought in to the king is correctly described as an overseer, the time to which Jesus points may well be the time of year when the taxes became due, the time of the settling of the books for another year. To continue the interpretation of the parable along the same lines, Jesus is speaking of God settling accounts with men. Jesus spoke of such a settling of accounts on other occasions. In the Parable of the Talents Jesus speaks of the master returning to settle accounts with his servants.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Rom. 11:36.

<sup>37</sup>Matt. 25:19.



In the Parable of the Dishonest Steward it is said that the rich man was settling accounts with his steward.<sup>38</sup> Yet these several mentionings of settling accounts do not describe the same thing. In the Parable of the Talents the reckoning takes place after a man has completed his life's work.<sup>39</sup> In that case, the settling of accounts refers to the final judgment. In the Parable of the Dishonest Steward the reckoning is made during his lifetime and therefore describes one of God's dealings with man during this present life.<sup>40</sup> The settling of accounts in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant is like the latter. It happens during the lifetime of a man. This reckoning is not the final judgment.<sup>41</sup> As the later events of this parable unfold, the exact nature of this reckoning will become evident.

#### The Sinner is Called Before God.

As the king prepares to set his records straight, he finds that his servants are indebted to him. In the parable, one of these servants is singled out and called before the king. The fact that the servant had to be brought to the king and did not come of his own accord is a good picture of the sinner. He must be summoned.<sup>42</sup> It may be that he

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<sup>38</sup>Luke 16:2.

<sup>39</sup>Trench, op. cit., p. 278.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Richey, op. cit., p. 205.

<sup>42</sup>Lenski, op. cit., p. 893.



is not even aware of his debt. It may be that he simply refuses to face it. At any rate, the sinner expresses indifference toward his own guilt. He must be brought before God so that the settling of accounts might take place.

The way that man is brought in before God in His rule is by the preaching of the law. This is likely the specific thing to which Jesus alludes when he speaks of the king bringing the servant to face him. It is evident that Jesus is speaking of something which occurs that makes the sinner face his sins with an aroused and accusing conscience.<sup>43</sup> Before the king drew him into account, the servant's conscience did not bother him, he did not feel the load of his sins, and would have gone right along piling up more debts. The weight of sins becomes apparent, however, when the reckoning comes.<sup>44</sup> Unless something had halted the complacency about his debt, the servant would have probably increased the debt to twenty thousand talents instead of ten thousand.<sup>45</sup> The sinner goes on heaping up guilt until God's wrath speaks.<sup>46</sup> The speaking of God's wrath, or that which makes a man's weight of sin apparent to him, is precisely

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Martin Luther, Evangelien-Auslegung, herausgegeben von Erwin Mülhaupt (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1939), II, 632.

<sup>45</sup>Trench, op. cit., p. 154.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.



the preaching of the Law. It is the Law which effects contrition in a man.<sup>47</sup> The knowledge of sin makes a man a humble man, works contrition, and makes it possible for a man to come to forgiveness.<sup>48</sup> So it is that God brings men in unto Him. It is evidence of God's providence, for without this reckoning the sinner might go on in indifference until it is too late.<sup>49</sup> Under the picture of a king bringing a servant before himself, Christ describes what happens when God's Law is preached to a man and He is brought face to face with God. The summons goes out and man stands facing an angered God.

#### The Sinner is Made Aware of his Great Debt

It is said of the servant that he is debtor to the amount of ten thousand talents. If the talents spoken of are Attic talents, the debt of the man was the equivalent of sixty million days' wages.<sup>50</sup> It is generally agreed that the talent spoken of should be understood as the Attic talent, rather than the Jewish talent, because the Attic talent is more easily divided into denarii and the contrast between the two debts named in the parable becomes more obvious.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Mueller, op. cit., p. 347.

<sup>48</sup>Luther, Evangelien-Auslegung, p. 632.

<sup>49</sup>Lenski, op. cit., p. 893.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 894.

<sup>51</sup>Siegfried Goebel, The Parables of Jesus: A Methodical Exposition, in Clark's Foreign Theological Library, translated by Professor Banks (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1883), XV, 285.



At any rate, the debt of the servant is a sum almost beyond calculation, and forbids all hope of payment.<sup>52</sup>

Interpreters are agreed that the debt is described as such a large debt to illustrate the immensity of man's guilt. Richey is of the opinion that the sum is so large to indicate "the greater responsibility of the Church and people of the Jews."<sup>53</sup> However, most interpreters find in this large figure the description of every man's guilt. So Trench says, "The great number of talents which make up the debt of the first servant fitly expresses the enormity of every man's transgression in thought, word, and deed, against God."<sup>54</sup> That the debt is so large as to be without hope of payment is an indication of the guilt which man piles up because of his sin. Every little sin is an act of rebellion and thus even small acts, which attract little or no attention, may be great sins. Moreover, they accumulate and no one can tell what the total amount in his own case may be.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps the specific number of talents which the servant owes the King alludes to the Ten Commandments which he should have kept but violated many times.<sup>56</sup> One could continue with such

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<sup>52</sup>Richey, op. cit., pp. 206f.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>54</sup>Trench, op. cit., p. 153.

<sup>55</sup>Alfred Plummer, An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew (Third edition; London: Robert Scott, 1911), p. 256.

<sup>56</sup>Trench, op. cit., p. 153.



little niceties, but almost all of them are in the realm of speculation. This much is clear: Jesus names such a large sum as the debt of this servant to describe the enormity of man's guilt before God.

The sinner has his sins set before his face. God brings him to a reckoning by the preaching of the Law and in that preaching awakens and alarms his conscience which had been asleep. Regardless of the exact means that God uses, He succeeds in bringing careless, carnal security to an end.<sup>57</sup> When the sinner is called before God and his debt is stated, he can no longer overlook it. "No one who has learnt [sic] from the Word something of his true state, . . . can, if he ever reflects at all, avoid regarding himself in the light of a debtor who owes to the Lord all that he is or has."<sup>58</sup> When the sinner is forced to face God, he knows that he is debtor of a great amount.

#### The Sinner is Made Aware of his Inability to Pay

Not only is the sinner made aware of the great size of his debt through the preaching of the Law; he is also made aware of his own nothingness, his inability to pay. The sinner finds himself in the situation where he can see only his own nothingness and worthlessness.<sup>59</sup> Having nothing to

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>William Bruce, Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew (Fourth edition; London, James Speirs, 1910), p. 408.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 409.



pay expresses the utter bankruptcy of every sinful man as he stands in the presence of the holy God and is tried by the strictness of the holy law.<sup>60</sup> A vivid perception is awakened in the mind of man of the state in which he stands, owing a great amount and helpless to pay.<sup>61</sup> Just as it is impossible for a man to earn sixty million days' wages by himself, so it is impossible for a sinner to pay off his guilt by himself. As far as payment goes, he finds himself helpless and hopeless.

#### God's Sentence is Pronounced.

When it has been established that the servant owes the debt which has been named, and that he cannot pay, the king pronounces a fitting sentence upon him. It must not be assumed that the pronouncement of this punishment was so harsh as to make it unrealistic. It will be remembered that the king was the sole master of the servant and thus could do with him as he wished, even sell him.<sup>62</sup> Besides, according to ancient law, a debtor was responsible for his debt in person as well as in property. He could be sold, with his wife and children, to satisfy the debt.<sup>63</sup> Even Mosaic law allowed the sale of an insolvent debtor and

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<sup>60</sup>Trench, op. cit., p. 155.

<sup>61</sup>Bruce, op. cit., p. 409.

<sup>62</sup>Nebe, op. cit., p. 401.

<sup>63</sup>Richey, op. cit., pp. 207f.



implies that even the family of that debtor may be included in the sale.<sup>64</sup> Thus the sentence that the debtor should be sold was harsh, but quite within legal limits.

That the servant should be sold has its counterpart in the consequences that should fall upon the sinner because of his perseverance in the course of impenitence.<sup>65</sup> More precisely, the sale of the debtor has its counterpart in the consignment of the sinner to the dominion of hell and the powers of darkness.<sup>66</sup> The command of God which comes upon the sinner is even more dreadful than that which came upon the debtor of the parable. The command of the sale of the sinner is the expression of God's right and power altogether to alienate from Himself, reject, and deliver over into bondage, all those who have come short of His glory. The terrible but righteous sentence states that the sinner shall be punished by everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and the glory of His power.<sup>67</sup> A man's sin brings upon him nothing but misery and condemnation. The consequences of his sin are not even confined to himself. Even those who have no actual share in the guilt are involved in the misery which it produces.<sup>68</sup> The con-

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<sup>64</sup>Lev. 25:39-41.

<sup>65</sup>Bruce, op. cit., p. 409.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., pp. 409f.

<sup>67</sup>Trench, op. cit., p. 155.

<sup>68</sup>plummer, op. cit., p. 257.



denmation which falls upon a man for his sin affects also his wife and family. God is completely just in pronouncing such a sentence, though the sentence is by no means light.

From the action of the servant when he had learned to know his predicament, one learns something of the purpose of God's righteous action. Jesus says that the servant falls down and worships the king. (Here is found one of the niceties of detail in the parable. The servant is said to worship the king in his plea. Later we will find that the other servant did not worship his fellow-servant. "Worship" is an honor paid to royal personages; it is out of place between equals.) Taking the position which points to his own awareness of his nothingness, the servant pleads that the king have patience with him. The same reaction strikes the sinner. This is the wound and hurt of all consciences, that when sin bites them, they feel how evil they are before God and there is no rest for them.<sup>69</sup> A heart that is thoroughly touched with the Law feels its own misery and calamity and is humbled to the extent that it falls down before the Lord and craves mercy.<sup>70</sup>

In this act of the sinner, God's purpose is accomplished. The sinner has been prepared for the reception of the Gospel message, that which makes his restoration complete. God has

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<sup>69</sup>Martin Luther, Sermons on the Most Interesting Doctrines of the Gospel, translator unknown (London: James Duncan, 1830), p. 373. Hereafter this work will be referred to as Sermons.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p. 373.



preached His Law with severity as a preparation for the grace of the Gospel.<sup>71</sup> The sinner is not yet completely aware of what is happening. He is still seeking something that might deliver him from his sin and rashly taking upon himself an attempt to pay God for his own sin.<sup>72</sup> He is not yet completely aware of his own dependent state. Yet God is moving toward His own goals. Without the shock of the reckoning, no forgiveness was possible.<sup>73</sup> But God had called for the reckoning and had pronounced the sentence upon the debtor. The man had been brought to the point where God had emptied him to the extent that the knowledge of forgiveness could fill him.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>Richey, op. cit., p. 208.

<sup>72</sup>Luther, Sermons, p. 373.

<sup>73</sup>Luther, Evangelien-Auslegung, p. 632.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid.



### CHAPTER III

#### GOD FREELY JUSTIFIES THE SINNER

##### God is a Merciful God

One short statement in the parable (Matt. 18:23-35) reveals a development which the servant had no right to expect. The king forgives the debt, wiping it out completely so that the misery and uneasiness which surrounded it in the mind of the debtor need plague him no longer. Until this point in the parable, the actions of God have been described as those of a righteous Judge. He has seemingly dealt with the sinner according to the strictness of law. The great debt of sin which every sinner owes has been described. God has reacted to that debt according to legal justice; it must be paid. But now God's reaction is different. He freely forgives the debt of sin. God is a righteous Judge, but He is at the same time a merciful God.<sup>1</sup> This second and greater truth becomes evident in the action of God which is now described.

One cannot fail to gain the impression from this parable that the grace of God is an acting and dynamic thing. Grace is often thought of in an abstract kind of way, as a mere doctrine or intellectual conception.

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<sup>1</sup>A. Nebe, Die Evangelischen Perikopen des Kirchenjahres (Third revised edition; Wiesbaden: Julius Niedner, 1887), III, 404.



The parable presents this grace as a living and real way in the person of the King, who is the Author and Source of all grace.<sup>2</sup> It is a grace which acts when sinners need it desperately. It is a grace which acts decisively, and having acted, is complete.

God Has Prepared the Sinner for the Reception of Grace.

It might seem that if God were going to act in grace toward the sinners with whom He comes into contact, the harsh message of the Law would be out of place. Yet this is far from true. The harshness of the Law prepares a man for grace. For the sinner never realizes that his sins are far too heavy for him to carry by himself until the words of the Law have struck him. After the preaching of the Law, sin becomes staggering.<sup>3</sup> In the mind of the sinner there is no need for God's grace because he is either complacent in his sin or, at least, unconcerned about its consequences. Unless the Law were preached, God's grace would be meaningless to man. But a man becomes aware of the great gulf between the just God and his own sinful self when he recognizes his sin.<sup>4</sup> That recognition comes only when the sinner is made aware of the greatness of his sin

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<sup>2</sup>Thomas Richey, The Parables of the Lord Jesus according to St. Matthew (New York: E. & J. B. Young and Co., 1888), p. 203.

<sup>3</sup>Nebe, op. cit., p. 402.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.



and of sin's terrible consequences.

This preaching of the Law in no way negates the gracious action of God. The message of the Law adds to the meaning of grace. Archbishop Trench points this out very adequately:

God will forgive; but He will have the sinner to know what and how much he is forgiven; there must be first a "Come now, and let us reason together," before the scarlet can be made white as snow. The sinner must know his sins for what they are, a mountain of transgression, before ever they can be cast into the deep sea of God's mercy. He must first have the sentence of death in himself, ere the words of life will have any abiding worth for him.<sup>5</sup>

Only after a man's guilt becomes very real to him may he know the reality of the grace of God.

The effect of the preaching of the Law as a preparation for grace is shown in the reaction of the servant of the parable to the harsh judgment spoken upon him. He had been made aware of a debt which he could never pay. He had heard the just sentence spoken. He was to be sold with his wife and children. He was aware of the predicament that he was in because of his sin. He has been brought face to face with sin and he recognizes it for what it is. At the time of its recognition, he doesn't even find it possible to look into the face of the Lord. He falls down and can do nothing more than utter a prayer.<sup>6</sup> The severity

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<sup>5</sup>Richard C. Trench, Notes on the Parables of our Lord (Westwood, N. J.: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1953), p. 157.

<sup>6</sup>Nebe, op. cit., p. 402.



of the Law has served as a preparation for the grace of the Gospel.<sup>7</sup>

**God Has Found Nothing in the Sinner to Warrant Grace.**

The parable also makes very clear that there was nothing on the part of the servant that should have caused the king to forgive his debt. Whether he had incurred the large debt through outright dishonesty or through carelessness is not known. It doesn't matter, however, because in either case the debt is just as large and just as real. It was a legitimate debt to the king, which, according to any standard other than that finally imposed by the king, should have been paid. The debt should have warranted either payment or punishment.

Nor is there anything in the character of the debtor which should have induced the gracious act of the king. The servant had not come to the king to seek lenience or to explain how it had happened that the debt had become so large. He was simply going his unconcerned way until the king called him into account. As Archbishop Trench points out, he was more likely on his way toward doubling the debt than eliminating it.<sup>8</sup> The servant's failure to show any concern about the debt until the king calls him into account adequately illustrates that there was nothing

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<sup>7</sup>Richey, op. cit., p. 208.

<sup>8</sup>Trench, op. cit., p. 154.



in the character of the debtor that called forth the gracious act of the king.

Although the servant seemed to think otherwise, there was also nothing in the plea which he made before the king which should have prompted the king to be gracious. He made a plea for patience and made a rash promise to repay whatever he owed. The servant was not aware that patience could gain him nothing. His debt was of the nature that he could never repay it.<sup>9</sup> Such a plea was simply rash and his promise could under no circumstances have been fulfilled. Actually, the servant had not yet come to the true recognition of the immensity of his debt.<sup>10</sup> Under those circumstances, his plea was meaningless and certainly had nothing about it that forced the king to show mercy.

Precisely the same things are true of the sinner as he confronts God with the weight of his own sins. To suppose that God would be gracious because the sins were not too gross is ridiculous. Every sin, regardless of how the sinner thinks of it, is an act of rebellion against God and therefore is immensely gross. The sinner's attitude toward his own sinful state certainly does not prompt God to forgive. For like the servant of the parable, man is unconcerned about his sin. He would rather hide it

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<sup>9</sup>Webe, op. cit., p. 154.

<sup>10</sup>Trench, op. cit., p. 156.



than confess it. Any discussion of his sinfulness is distasteful to him. He avoids the message of the law as long as possible. Neither the nature of his sin nor his attitude toward sin gives God any cause to be gracious.

Even the plea of a sinner, as he finds himself knocked down before God's law, does not cause God to be gracious. Man's plea, as it is represented in this parable, is tainted with the voice of self-righteousness, imagining that, with enough time, he could make all the past shortcomings good.<sup>11</sup> The prayer of the servant is characteristic of the moment of terror and anguish in which a sinful man is ready to promise impossible things if only he can be delivered from his present fear.<sup>12</sup> Should some rash promise on the part of sinful man prompt God to forgive him? Certainly not. A sinner can offer nothing in his life or petition to warrant the grace of God. As a matter of fact, the sinner cannot even imagine that God will simply forgive him all his sins, immense as the number and weight of them are.<sup>13</sup> The cause for justification of the sinner is not found in the sinner.

#### Any Cause for Justification Lies in God.

From beginning to end, from the calling of the sinner

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>R. C. H. Lenski, The Gospel Selections of the Ancient Church (Columbus, Ohio: Lutheran Book Concern, 1936), p. 896.



before Him until the pronouncement of release, whatever takes place is solely the work of God. Even God's severity points forward to something which He intends to accomplish.

The severity of God only endures till the sinner is brought to acknowledge his guilt; it is, indeed, like Joseph's harshness with his brethren, nothing else than love in disguise; and having done its work, having brought him to own that he is verily guilty, it re-appears as grace again.<sup>14</sup>

If the sinner is to be emptied of pride or self-sufficiency, God must do that emptying. Certainly, then, if the sinner is to be filled with any comfort, God must also do that filling.

God knows the guilt of sinful man. God knows man's lack of concern for his guilt. God knows the rash plea and promise of the sinner. None of these brings any reason to cause God to change His threat of utter condemnation. Yet even God's threat serves to bring man's debt to this head, that it may be abolished.<sup>15</sup> Even God's threat of punishment, therefore, contains in it something that is foreign to the sinner's way of thinking. Certainly God's announcement of forgiveness is something altogether foreign to the sinner. As the sinner had no part in what God intended to accomplish through His preaching of the law, so the sinner has no part in what God accomplishes through His preaching of the Gospel. The compassion of the Lord is even outside the realm of the

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<sup>14</sup>Trench, op. cit., p. 157.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.



sinner's request.<sup>16</sup> God is in action when He threatens. God is in action when He forgives. Particularly the latter is outside of the sinner's way of thinking. Surely he is not the cause of its being brought about. The sinner cannot even know God's ways. Then surely any cause for justification must lie in God, and not in sinful man.

#### God Receives the Fallen Man.

It is God's way of dealing with man that He takes to Himself precisely these people who can offer no merit of their own. He succeeds in thoroughly terrifying man by His anger and forces that man to crawl like a worm in the dust.<sup>17</sup> But it is that same man that God then receives to Himself. He sees past the rash, foolish offer of the sinner and sees instead an outcry of despair.<sup>18</sup> To men in despair the message of the Gospel becomes meaningful. It is to despairing men that God offers more than they dare even hope for, the complete forgiveness of their debt.<sup>19</sup> Luther points this out clearly when he says that God forgives them that have nothing and pardons them that have nothing left with which to pay.<sup>20</sup> It is the way of the Gospel that it

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<sup>16</sup>Nebe, op. cit., p. 405.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 404.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Richey, op. cit., p. 209.

<sup>20</sup>Martin Luther, Sermons on the Most Interesting Doctrines of the Gospel, translator unknown (London: James Duncan, 1830), p. 375. Hereafter this work will be referred to as Sermons.



comes to man when he is drowned in sins and weary. This Gospel says to the man, "Don't work and afflict yourself until you go mad because these things profit nothing." The Gospel brings the mercy of God as deliverance. God takes pity on the crying complaint of a man fallen on his knees.<sup>21</sup>

This truth which Luther and others find in this parable is thoroughly Scriptural. The Psalmist already confessed that his God was the kind of God who would not despise the broken and contrite spirit.<sup>22</sup> God drives sinful man to anguish and contrition. But to the same man to whom the law has been preached God also makes known the Gospel of gracious forgiveness. To the worm in the dust God says, "Rise, your sins are forgiven you."

#### God Justifies the Sinner.

The king had said to the servant of the parable that he must be sold with his wife and children so that the debt might be paid. That was law. The king now has more to say to that servant. He says now that the servant and his wife and children will not be sold nor will they need concern themselves any longer with the payment of the debt. God speaks in grace after He has spoken the threat of punishment. God no longer deals with the man according to the law, but

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<sup>21</sup>ibid., p. 374.

<sup>22</sup>ps. 51:17.



deals now with grace and favor, dismissing the sinner and his family, and forgiving him the debt.<sup>23</sup> God not only removes his fault but also the punishment which was due him because of his sin.<sup>24</sup>

The act of justification on the part of God is an act which far outstrips the demand for recognition on the part of the suppliant.<sup>25</sup> Patience profits the sinner nothing; his justification changes his status completely.<sup>26</sup> The sinner sees in God what to him seems to be a complete reversal. He has no reason to hope that the goodness of God will take preference over His righteous wrath. But it is exactly this thing, for which he cannot hope, that happens.<sup>27</sup> This is something different from that which the sinner seeks. He hopes to be able to pay for his guilt in some manner. But the Pharisaic idea of compensation for evil deeds with good works is done away in the announcing of God's forgiveness.<sup>28</sup>

What happened when God forgave the debt has its most exact parallel in what happens in Baptism. In that Sacrament,

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<sup>23</sup>Luther, Sermons, p. 374.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Richey, op. cit., p. 209.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Nebe, op. cit., p. 404.

<sup>28</sup>Adolf Schlatter, Der Evangelist Matthäus (Stuttgart: Calwer Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1929), p. 550.



God takes a debtor and makes him a free man.<sup>29</sup> That is the kind of justification which this parable describes. God is pictured in action with His grace. He takes a sinful man and declares him to be righteous, debt-free. "Here we have a true picture of the boundless universality of the Lord's divine love and mercy towards every individual of the human race."<sup>30</sup> "Great as are our delinquencies, the Lord freely remits them all, not imputing our transgressions unto us."<sup>31</sup>

Schlatter, especially, sees at this point in the parable an exact parallel to what St. Paul says of justification. The parable sets forth justification as an act of perfect and powerful grace, just as Paul does in Romans.<sup>32</sup> Jesus states as strongly as Paul that the great debt owed to God is removed through a merciful act of God, free forgiveness.<sup>33</sup>

This forgiving act of God is one of the central emphases of the parable which were named above.<sup>34</sup> As is now evident, the truth of God's justification is certainly a

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<sup>29</sup>Martin Luther, Evangelien-Auslegung, herausgegeben von Erwin Milhaupt (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1939), II, 624.

<sup>30</sup>William Bruce, Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew (Fourth edition; London, James Speirs, 1910), p. 411.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Schlatter, op. cit., p. 560.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Supra, p. 7.



vital part of the message that the parable presents. God has been described as a forgiving God, the God who takes a crest-fallen sinner and declares him righteous. God does not want to damn men, though He should if He acted purely in punitive justice.<sup>35</sup> Jesus has presented His Father as a Forgiver of debts. The Kingdom of which Jesus is speaking is a Kingdom of the forgiveness of sins.<sup>36</sup>

The knowledge of God's activity as it is presented in the parable is very important to every man. It is the Christian's own awareness of how God has freely forgiven him that makes it possible for him to confess in the Third Article: "I believe in the forgiveness of sins."<sup>37</sup> Anyone that is to join the ranks of Christians must have this same knowledge and be able to make this same personal confession. Jesus spoke the parable to His disciples. In the forgiven servant they must have been able to see themselves. In the activity of the king they must have come to know a little more clearly what kind of a God they served and worshiped. The parable makes clear that God freely justifies the sinner. To sinners it could have no more important message than this.

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<sup>35</sup>Luther, Evangelien-Auslegung, p. 625.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Nebe, op. cit., p. 405.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE LIFE OF THE JUSTIFIED IS PATTERNED AFTER GOD'S FORGIVENESS

#### Justification Has More Than Momentary Effects.

The specific situation in which Jesus spoke this parable (Matt. 18:23-35) was created by a problem in the life of the disciples. Peter's question immediately preceding its telling is evidence that the disciples were troubled with the problem of forgiveness among brothers. After having placed all of what He is about to say into the context of God's forgiveness, Jesus moves on to speak specifically of the problem. In a general way, Jesus' answer states that God's act of declaring a man righteous should cause that man to lead a changed life.

It is true that God's act of declaring a man righteous for Christ's sake is not a long process but simply a divine judgment upon man through which that man's relation to God is reversed.<sup>1</sup> Yet, though a man may come to know of his justification in a moment, the effects of his justification are to fill his entire life. The man who has been justified also becomes a member of the kingdom of God, one of those

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<sup>1</sup>John Theodore Mueller, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1934), p. 367.



under God's rule.<sup>2</sup> It has already been established that God rules in this kingdom through His grace.<sup>3</sup> It is furthermore true of God's rule that He expects all of His "servants" to practice forgiveness in brotherly service and well-doing.<sup>4</sup> The man who has been placed into the state of grace is expected to live in grace. Therefore the parable has a very definite lesson for those who are under grace. For them this is the chief lesson -- that "it is not always right, but often the most opposite to right, to press our rights, that in the kingdom of grace the summum ius may be the summa iniuria".<sup>5</sup>

This second emphasis of the parable is, then, meant for those who have come to know God's forgiveness. The parable is not simply trying to teach brotherly forgiveness as a moral obligation. Jesus is not trying to present a lesson in natural ethic. His purpose to inculcate the duty of forgiveness on men who are themselves forgiven of God, and living under a reign of grace.<sup>6</sup> In the Fifth Petition of the Lord's Prayer, Christian people pray that

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<sup>2</sup>Martin Luther, Sermons on the Most Interesting Doctrines of the Gospel, translator unknown (London: James Duncan, 1830), p. 370. Hereafter this work will be referred to as Sermons.

<sup>3</sup>Supra, p. 41.

<sup>4</sup>Luther, Sermons, p. 370.

<sup>5</sup>Richard C. Trench, Notes on the Parables of our Lord (Westwood, N. J.: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1953), p. 159.

<sup>6</sup>Thomas Richey, The Parables of the Lord Jesus according to St. Matthew (New York: E. & J. B. Young and Co., 1888), p. 213.



God forgive them as they forgive those who become debtors to them.<sup>7</sup> Jesus at another place says, "Forgive, and you will be forgiven."<sup>8</sup> Matthew reports that Jesus gave a little commentary on the meaning of the Fifth Petition immediately after He taught it to His disciples. There He promises that if His disciples forgive men their trespasses, God will also forgive the sins of the disciples; He also warns that if they fail to forgive, God will also not forgive them.<sup>9</sup> All of these statements of Christ indicate that there is a very close relationship between God's forgiveness and the forgiveness which brother shows to brother. Only in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, however, is it made perfectly clear that God's forgiveness comes first and that forgiveness on the part of man follows God's forgiveness, being patterned after God's gracious activity toward men. The forgiving spirit which a man shows in imitation of God doesn't gain him any further forgiveness but is simply his way of giving praise and thanks to the God who forgave him. God's justification of a man is expected to have an effect in the entire life of that man.

#### Faith Receives God's Justification.

Regardless of how a man may conduct himself after having

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<sup>7</sup>Matt. 6:12.

<sup>8</sup>Luke 6:37.

<sup>9</sup>Matt. 6:14-15.



been forgiven by God, the objective fact stands firm that Christ has put away the sin of the world and that the forgiven man through Baptism has received the forgiveness of sins.<sup>10</sup> So in the parable, there is no doubt that the servant was actually forgiven and declared free from debt though he failed to let this fact influence his life at all. Yet, as Luther emphasizes, this forgiveness was meaningless to that servant because he failed to receive it in faith.<sup>11</sup> It is not enough that the remission of sins be preached; it is also necessary that it be received and believed in the heart.<sup>12</sup> Even though God applies the redemptive work of Christ to a man who comes before Him as a debtor, if that man refuses to receive and accept God's forgiveness, he actually has no forgiveness. It is through faith in God's proclamation that a man knows that he has really been made free.<sup>13</sup>

When faith receives God's justification, a man is living in the state of grace. God's proclamation that his sins have been forgiven is always prominent in that man's mind. It is important that he no longer listen to the accusations of his own unbelieving heart but that he always

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<sup>10</sup>Trench, op. cit., pp. 161f.

<sup>11</sup>Luther, Sermons, p. 375.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>A. Nebe, Die Evangelischen Perikopen des Kirchenjahres (Third revised edition; Wiesbaden: Julius Niedner, 1887), III, 406.



remember what God has said to him.<sup>14</sup> He learns to conduct himself according to the grace in which he lives. If grace has taken hold of a man, then it must have taken hold of the whole man.<sup>15</sup> Such is the nature of the faith of the forgiven man. He is aware of the blessedness which is his because the Lord does not impute his iniquities unto him.<sup>16</sup> God declares the sinner righteous. In faith that sinner becomes aware of what has happened to him. He is a changed man. His faith has received God's justification.

#### God's Justification Prompts Love.

Two things happened when the sinner pleaded before God. God showed mercy to the sinner and declared him righteous. In the second place, God set an example of forgiving love to be followed.<sup>17</sup> That the king of the parable intended both these things is made clear by his review of what had happened when the servant was called before him the second time. He states that He forgave the servant his entire debt. He furthermore states that the mercy of the king should have been an example for the actions of the servant. He should have shown mercy just as (Greek: ὡς) the king

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Martin Luther, Evangelien-Auslegung, herausgegeben von Erwin Mülhaupt (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1939), II, 625.

<sup>16</sup>Ps. 32:2.

<sup>17</sup>Nebe, op. cit., p. 411.



showed him mercy.

The love toward offending brothers which should be manifest in the life of a justified man doesn't earn him any further forgiveness. He has already been declared righteous.<sup>18</sup> Yet there are two things that should be found in the life of a man who has been made a Christian. One of them is faith; the other is love.<sup>19</sup> This love is none other than the new commandment which Christ gave to His followers. John quotes Jesus as saying, "A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another, as I have loved you."<sup>20</sup> God gave the example of this love in His forgiving act. A love of the same kind is to be a part of the Christian life, not as a salvation-producing work, but as a reflection of the love first shown him.

Richey says of this love,

It is a forgiving love, based upon the consideration of each other's weakness and liability to offend; and it is to be like the love of God to the sinner, not based upon the thought of return; not bounded or limited in measure; but free, and from the heart; without measure or degree.<sup>21</sup>

Such love closely parallels the love of God for the sinner. That is precisely the love that God may expect to find as He views the life of the man whom He has declared righteous. Its specific area, according to the parable, is the area of

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<sup>18</sup>Luther, Sermons, p. 377.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>John 13:34. Italics, the writer's.

<sup>21</sup>Richey, op. cit., p. 217.



forgiveness.

If a man lives on after he has received the forgiveness of God, he must live in the dynamic power of received forgiveness. What he does has to do with his neighbor, the people with whom he lives. God expects his works toward his neighbor to be good, not because faith is not enough, but so that faith may be shown. God knows the faith of a man very well but the world and the man himself cannot see it thoroughly unless it expresses itself in life.<sup>22</sup> We are told in the parable that the servant went out from the presence of the king. It is in that going out that love should have begun to operate. Faith draws us away from our surroundings to God; love leads us back out to the people.<sup>23</sup> There should be no difference in the conduct of the Christian whether he is in the immediate presence of God or whether he has gone out into the world again. Yet it is possible that there be a great difference between the activity of the inner man, connected with heaven, and the activity of the outer man, connected with people.<sup>24</sup> Such a thing should never be true of the man who has been given God's justification. His entire life should be a reflection of what happened when he was in the presence of God, when God declared him righteous.

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<sup>22</sup>Luther, Sermons, p. 376.

<sup>23</sup>Luther, Evangelien-Auslegung, p. 638.

<sup>24</sup>William Bruce, Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew (Fourth edition; London, James Speirs, 1910), pp. 411f.



### The Example of the Servant

In the servant of the parable under consideration, an example of how a justified man might misuse his new state is given. It is said that this servant went out from the presence of the king and found a fellow servant who owed him a small sum of money. The fact that this second servant is called a "fellow-servant" does not imply that the two were equal in rank or that they filled similar offices. The term is simply meant to express the fact that, like the first servant, his relation to the king was also that of a servant to a master.<sup>25</sup> Any attempt to determine whether this second servant is also one who had been declared debt-free by the king is idle speculation. Furthermore, it doesn't matter, for the Christian obligation of forgiveness does not divide those to whom this forgiveness is to be shown into groups. It suffices to say that both of the men involved were in the service of the king.

The debt of this second servant to the servant that had been forgiven is said to be a hundred denarii. The size of this debt is almost negligible as compared to the size of the former debt of the forgiven servant. The ratio between the debt owed the king and the debt of one servant to another indicates that our debt to God is infinitely greater than

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<sup>25</sup>Trench, op. cit., p. 158.



another man's debt to us can ever be.<sup>26</sup> It indicates how little any man can offend against his brother, compared with what every man has offended against God.<sup>27</sup> It was not an unusual situation that the forgiven servant should find another servant who was debtor to him. Nor is it unusual that a justified man should find another man who has caused him some offence. But in either case, the comparative size of the debts, as indicated in the parable, is like a drop of water to a boundless ocean. A brother's offense can hardly be compared to a man's offences against God.

In spite of this, the forgiven servant does not consider this debt to be negligible. He demands full payment. The words which are used by the first servant, εἴ τι ὀφείλεις, do not imply any doubt as to whether the debt was really due or not. The construction which he uses was originally a courteous form of making a demand.<sup>28</sup> Thus the εἴ in the servant's demand is not conditional in the sense that he did not know whether his fellow-servant owed him anything or not. The story has already said that he did. The servant is simply using a kind of logic which lacks all compassion. The sense of the statement is: Should you be indebted (as

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<sup>26</sup> Julius Schniewind, Das Evangelium nach Matthäus, in Das Neue Testament Deutsch (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1950), II, 202.

<sup>27</sup> Trench, op. cit., p. 158.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 158f.



you are), then you must pay.<sup>29</sup> The forgiven servant is demanding his due.

Even before the story has gone any farther and before the forgiven servant has been reprimanded for his action, there is a note of contempt toward this servant expressed in the wording of the parable. As if to make very sure that all the hearers know that the servant of whom Jesus now speaks is the same servant who had earlier been forgiven, Jesus begins to use the demonstrative pronoun, when he mentions the servant. There seems to be meaning in the emphatic repetition of this pronoun, the emphasis being laid on the fact that the servant who now begins to deal unmercifully is the same one to whom mercy had been shown.<sup>30</sup>

The demand on the part of this servant, places the fellow-servant in exactly the same position in which he had formerly found himself. The second servant does not have the money to pay the debt. So exact is the parallel with what has preceded in the case of the first servant and the king, that the second servant uses the same words in his plea for mercy. It would seem that the similarity of this situation to the one which had just occurred before the king would have reminded the forgiven servant of what the king had done in the same situation.<sup>31</sup> The first servant had found

<sup>29</sup>Nabe, op. cit., p. 407.

<sup>30</sup>Orloney, op. cit., p. 210.

<sup>31</sup>Nabe, op. cit., p. 408.



mercy when he used this plea in the agony of distress. Yet the plea finds no mercy on this occasion. It was not the plea in either case that called forth mercy. It was the mind and compassion of the one to whom the plea was addressed. The king had shown mercy. The servant betrays a spirit quite different than that of the king. The servant uses the uncompassionate logic which says: You owe me something, so you will have to pay.<sup>32</sup> Carrying out his demand, he has this fellow-servant committed to prison until the debt be settled. He was willing to receive forgiveness for himself but was not willing to forgive.<sup>33</sup>

#### Reactions of the Fellow-redeemed

This action of the servant who had been forgiven did not go unnoticed by those around him. They too could see the inconsistency involved, for he had been forgiven and yet refused to forgive. Commentators are agreed that these fellow-servants, who observed what was happening, were also among those who had been forgiven by the king. At any rate, they must have known of the king's forgiveness or this behavior of the servant would not have seemed so out of place to them. It was the attitude of the servant which drove these fellow-redeemed to grief. They must report that though the Lord forgave this servant everything, yet

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<sup>32</sup>D. Robert Kübel, Exegetisch-Homiletisches Handbuch zum Evangelium des Matthäus (Nördlingen: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1889), p. 346.

<sup>33</sup>Luther, Sermons, p. 378.



he refused to deal with others as He had dealt with him.<sup>34</sup>

Richey says of this incident,

The thing represented, is the protest, on the part of the Church, against a spirit which was foreign to her true nature and function. It is her duty to complain and to pray to her divine Head; but not to judge the offender. Judgment belongs exclusively to Christ Himself.<sup>35</sup>

The sincere servants of God are upset at the hard-heartedness of the unforgiving man and are also concerned about the plight of the one of their number who has been placed into jail. Because of what they are and what they see, they bring the matter to the King whom they know can help.<sup>36</sup>

Actually they are not so much distressed by the debtor's lamentable conduct.<sup>37</sup> The fellow-redeemed cannot stand idly by and see the grace of God in a man so misused. When a forgiven man fails to forgive, the matter must be brought to God.

#### Failure to Forgive Expels a Man from Grace

When the matter is reported to the king, there is another summoning. The servant again stands before the judgment seat where he had earlier been declared righteous. This second time, however, the sentence is of quite another

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Richey, op. cit. pp. 212f.

<sup>36</sup>Nebe, op. cit., pp. 409f.

<sup>37</sup>Richey, op. cit., p. 212.



nature. The parable does not relate what that servant may have thought as he made his way back to the king. He could well have known what was about to happen. If the law which he used in dealing with his fellow-servants was one of the strictest, severest judgment, he could have expected God to use this same law in dealing with him.<sup>38</sup> That is exactly the way it turned out. God measured to him again in the same measure wherein he had meted.<sup>39</sup>

The king's sentence this time is a sentence of judgment. He had threatened judgment earlier, but had replaced that sentence with gracious forgiveness. Now an even greater judgment befalls the unforgiving servant than had been threatened earlier. His lack of compassion calls down a sentence upon him in which there is no compassion.<sup>40</sup>

The reason that God shows no compassion in His judgment upon the failure of a justified man to forgive is not found in that man's former offenses. God does not revive these former offences that they may be punished. It is the second offence which calls down its own punishment.<sup>41</sup> The servant is now charged with a new guilt. Having received mercy, he refused to show mercy.<sup>42</sup> His refusal to show mercy does not

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<sup>38</sup>Trench, op. cit., p. 159.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Nebe, op. cit., p. 413.

<sup>41</sup>Trench, op. cit., p. 163.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 161.



bear witness that he had received no mercy but, on the contrary, the stress of his offence is, that having received an infinite mercy, he remained unmerciful yet.<sup>43</sup>

It is this second offence that calls down upon the servant the title, "Wicked servant." Even when the servant came before the king with his great debt, he had not been called that. His ingratitude and cruelty have made this a fitting designation.<sup>44</sup>

A sentence is spoken upon that servant which befits his wickedness. Because he failed to forgive, though he had been forgiven, he was delivered to the torturers until he should pay his debt. The word, βαρύνεται, "reaches out beyond the parable, and expresses in Jewish symbolism the thought of punishment, not purgatorial but punitive, in Gehenna."<sup>45</sup> The torture to which the man is subjected likely refers to the punishments of Hell.<sup>46</sup> (Jesus had none of the modern qualms about speaking of the punishments of Hell.) The punishment which befalls a justified man who fails to forgive is the punishment of Hell.

It is said that the servant should remain in the hands of the torturers until his debt should be paid. Just as it

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Alan Hugh McNeile, The Gospel according to St. Matthew (London: Macmillan & Co., 1949), p. 270.

<sup>46</sup>G. Montefiore, The Synoptic Gospels (Second revised edition; London: Macmillan & Co., 1927), II, 254.



would have been impossible for the unforgiving servant ever to have paid back his debt in the first place, so it is impossible for him ever to pay back his present debt. The words: "Until he paid everything that he owed," do not hold forth the hope that such a thing would ever be possible.<sup>47</sup> The judgment is final.

In the concluding sentence of the parable, Jesus refers to God as "My" Father. The use of this pronoun underlines the fact that a man cannot address God as his Father when he is unforgiving, contrary to God's will. Even this pronoun seems to hint at the finality of this judgment of the servant. If people who have been forgiven are not willing to forgive, the judgment which comes upon them obviously implies that they may no longer take comfort in the thought that God is their good and gracious Father.<sup>48</sup>

#### God's Justification Makes Demands on the Justified

Looking in retrospect at the events of the parable, it is found that life was given the servant who came with the great debt, but not so that he could spoil the life of another. A man is declared righteous before God, but not so that he can forcefully exercise his "rights" over others.<sup>49</sup> God

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<sup>47</sup>Nebe, op. cit., pp. 413f.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 414.

<sup>49</sup>Adolf Schlatter, Der Evangelist Matthäus (Stuttgart: Calver Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1929), p. 560.



has forsaken His rights over the man on whom He has had mercy. God could have demanded what was rightfully His, namely, full satisfaction for sin. God, however, waived His right and He expects the man with sins forgiven to do the same toward others. If a man wishes to maintain his status in God's Kingdom, God requires of that man that he do the same as God, namely, take pity and forgive.<sup>50</sup> The parable teaches clearly that they who owe their place to the King's grace must learn to deal graciously.<sup>51</sup>

Every grace which God bestows on a man gives Him a greater claim to that man's life and heightens his obligations toward Him. If that man brings what God has done for him to nothing, then the heat of God's anger becomes as great as the warmth of His love had been.<sup>52</sup> God does not forbid a man to make use of his natural endowments. Business pursuits are not prohibited for those who are members of God's Kingdom.<sup>53</sup> But when a man has asked for and received forgiveness, he has implicitly pledged himself to show the same forgiveness. When God calls on a member of His Kingdom to forgive, as He does, He is not asking him to renounce a right; He is bringing home to him the fact that he no longer

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<sup>50</sup>Luther, Sermons, p. 377.

<sup>51</sup>Richey, op. cit., p. 201.

<sup>52</sup>Webe, op. cit., p. 412.

<sup>53</sup>Bruce, op. cit., p. 413.



has any right to exercise in the matter.<sup>54</sup> The fact that God has justified the man makes demands on the man's life. This is Christian obligation which has its roots in the great act of Redemption. God's forgiveness brings with it the new responsibility of forgiveness between brothers.<sup>55</sup>

In the unfortunate example of what happened to the forgiven servant who failed to forgive, the second emphasis of the parable is found. God's rule of grace here on earth had to be made like (ὡς μὲν ὡς ἄρα) the story of this parable because if God is to continue to forgive us, we too must forgive others.<sup>56</sup> That the disciples who asked the question which led to the telling of this parable learned also this second lesson, is evident from their later writings.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Trench, op. cit., p. 152.

<sup>55</sup>Richey, op. cit., p. 214.

<sup>56</sup>R. C. H. Lenski, The Gospel Selections of the Ancient Church (Columbus, Ohio: Lutheran Book Concern, 1936), p. 892.

<sup>57</sup>See: I Pet. 3:9; I John 3:15; James 2:13.

It is set up as the example for man's forgiveness of his brother. Along with this example comes the warning that God cannot continue to forgive if His servants refuse to forgive. The parable is comforting to troubled consciences inasmuch as it speaks of the forgiveness of sins. Yet it warns of terrible judgment upon the unmerciful and hard-hearted, even though they be called Christians.

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<sup>58</sup>Martin Luther, Sermons on the Most Interesting Parables of the Gospel, translated by Martin Luther (London: James Nisbet, 1850), p. 277.



## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

After a study of the original text, passages of similar content, the context of the parable, and the writings of many other interpreters of this parable, the writer finds that Jesus very definitely describes the act of justification in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. That which happened to the servant when he first appeared before the King was that he was made a Christian. This declaring a man righteous is God's gracious act of justification. The terms of Christ are not so explicit as those of Paul, nor is there any explicit reference to Christ as the cause of justification in the parable. Yet Jesus describes the act as Paul describes it, namely, as a gracious act of God who finds no merit in man.

God's gracious act is underlined in the parable in that it is set up as the example for man's forgiveness of his brother. Along with this example comes the warning that God cannot continue to forgive if His servants refuse to forgive.

The parable is comforting to troubled consciences inasmuch as it speaks of the forgiveness of sins. Yet it warns of terrible judgment upon the unmerciful and hard-hearted, even though they be called Christians.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Martin Luther, Sermons on the Most Interesting Doctrines of the Gospel, translator unknown (London: James Duncan, 1830), p. 379.



The parable presents God's act of justification as a thing necessary to everyone, a thing easy to obtain, but a thing hard to safeguard.

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