

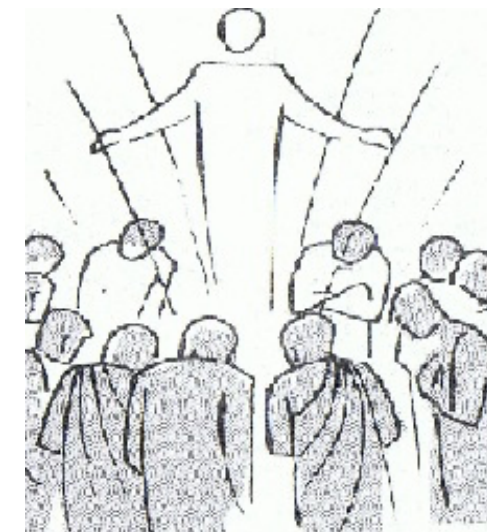
Gospel of Matthew

18:19-35

A very self-focused Servant



Vs. 19- I must address this short bit of text before moving on to the parable of the unmerciful servant. It is important to note that this brief passage assures us that we can assume that God is attentive to our earthly needs, our requests, our activities - both good *and* ill-conceived. He is not disengaged from His people, but interested and active in our lives, especially for the sake of His purposes. We tend to know this intuitively, and we *think* we want Him involved in the big decisions of our lives. But since we humans seem to excel in putting words in God's mouth that favor what we want to do, Jesus gives us a formula for actually determining the Lord's will. I think we can call it the "**formula of agreement**". For far too long Christians have practiced a formula whereby we make our *difficult* or *complicated* decisions, or decisions that are a real **gamble**, solely between ourselves and God. Sometimes we really do struggle with determining what is the right thing to do, but most of the time we are already leaning in one direction or another. Then we go to God with it - and almost inevitably we conclude that God agrees with us. But the truth is that we had already determined what we were going to do before we took it to the Lord. Since the Lord rarely speaks audibly, it is pretty easy for us to imagine that He agrees with our point of view! So Jesus adds one element to the decision-making formula – an element that is a foreign and actually, unwelcome, addition to the process. He indicates that at least one other person should be involved – and it goes without saying that that person or persons should be someone that is impartial, that is wise, and that cares about us, and that truly desires that the Lord's will needs to be determined, and will tell you the truth about what they have determined!



He is witness to all our comings and goings, to the things done in the open and the things intended for secrecy! He is the one in the middle of our lives, our comings and goings, our gatherings. So that,.. Jesus can confirm that where two or three are gathered in His Name, He is there in a special way. He is there when we are alone, and He is there when we are with someone. He is especially there where two or three (or more) are in agreement! He is Yahweh – The LORD – “The One Who Will Be With You”! He is the personally-involved God – in charge of spaces as big as the universe, yet has chosen to concentrate His focus in this realm upon the tiny people of a tiny earth – starting with you and I. But He is not focused on us so that it is okay if we are focused on ourselves – no – not at all. In fact the opposite! He is focused on us – forgiving and lavishing mercy and love upon us with a generosity we do not deserve, *so that* we, in turn, can lavish mercy and love upon other people, so that we can earn the right introduce them to their Creator and bring them into His embrace!



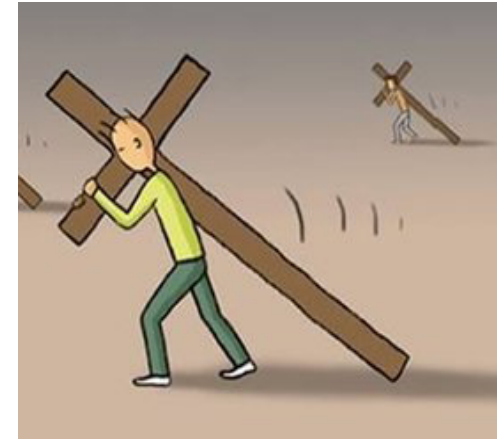
That actually leads into the next section where a master of an ancient Middle Eastern estate shows mercy to one of His servants who owes Him a lot of money. The servant in turn shows no mercy to someone who owes him money and is actually very cruel to that person! It is a shameful thing he does! He is found out, given a good dressing down, and severely punished! But it don't think that this passage is as much about cruelty and unforgiveness as much as it is about the self-blindness of the self-absorbed. We have a very good word for it in the English language. It is called “**narcissism**”.

Narcissism by definition is a personality disorder whereby a person is very self-absorbed. They care only about their own needs and wants, and have a deeply held impression that all other people exist solely to serve their needs and wants. They do not seem to have the capacity to value in any real way the needs or wants of others.

There is no empathy in them except in a superficial sense to use it to manipulate others. They also do not have the ability to critique themselves for reprehensible behavior. They are never wrong.

They must also be the center of attention. They crave and expect the admiration and even the adoration of others but can become very frustrated and angry if that does not happen. A narcissist cannot be a follower of Jesus Christ because they know no master and can bear no real loyalty to anyone except to themselves.

When a person comes to the Lord Jesus they must deny themselves and take up His cross. It is a self-denying posture that the Christ-follower must assume *for the rest of their lives!* Others become our focus because that is the pattern that our Leader provided for us Himself! Forgiveness and grace, kindness and gentleness, enduring patience. We are encouragers of our brothers and sisters in Christ, and of all people in general. Their success in knowing and following Jesus is our obsession! It is who we are and what we are all about!



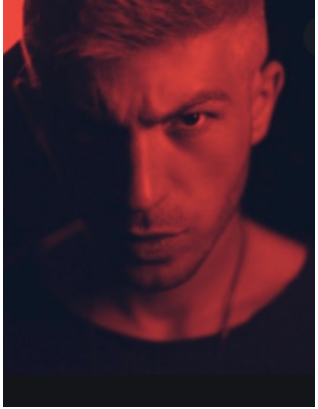
Vs. 21 - Peter begins this section on this very self-absorbed servant with a question about forgiveness. Jesus begins by giving a perfunctory answer. No, seven times is not the limit but seventy seven times. It is a play on words obviously, and another memorable one, where Jesus is trying to tell us not to place any actual number on forgiveness. The religious leaders had reasoned that seven was enough for any one person to be forgiven and after that it was not necessary to forgive that person. But Jesus is thinking of the bigger picture and how many times our Heavenly Father has continued to forgive us?!



Then Jesus begins to elaborate by telling a story. Jesus draws an unflattering picture of a unmerciful man whose bad example stands as a warning to us all! Here is a man who owes his master much, but cannot pay it! It must be an enormous amount because the King this man serves orders that the law be carried out. If a man owed a substantial amount of money, it was written in the contract and understood from the beginning that if he could not pay it back, he and all his household would be sold into slavery and the price they brought at the slave market would satisfy the debt! It was brutal, but then, it was a harsh and brutal world back then! This practice had been so commonplace since ancient times in every land that the law of Moses actually addressed it and wrote a clause into it that provided for seven years of service and then the slave was given his or her freedom and their debts forgiven. There was also a year of jubilee when every 50th year a general country-wide amnesty was to be observed. Sadly enough, but not surprising in the least given the nature of human greed, there is no indication that this was ever followed through on by the nation of Israel.

So Jesus spins a good yarn about this servant, a royal servant who serves the king. As servant positions go, it was a high and honor-bearing position. None but the very best could serve the king. So there is a matter of ego right from the start. Here is a man who serves the king, but who is in a place of high honor amongst his class or social status. He defers to the king and his court, but he is used to being *deferred to* by others outside the King's court. The King may or may not have paid his servants, but he takes care of their basic needs. And he seems to have been a generous or perhaps a shrewd man who has loaned much money to his servants. After all, they had to dress the part or attending the king and the important people that surrounded him. So that required expensive clothes – and clothes were *very* expensive indeed at that time, and he probably had succumbed to the temptation to live a lavish lifestyle! But one day the King, apparently on a whim, or maybe from some immediate need, decides to collect on the debts that his servants owe him. (Really - how many of us could survive if our bank suddenly and without warning called in our note on what they had loaned us? Certainly most of us couldn't do it without selling our home, cars, boat, vacation property, cashing in our pension plans, and liquidating anything else of value that we owned!) Well this particular servant owed the king much more than what he could quickly liquidate and pay on the loan – (my bible has a notation that says this was millions of dollars in today's currency)! When he informed the king that he did not have the money the king said that he must call in his collateral - the servant himself and his family! So the servant drops to his knees begging piteously for the King to give him more time to pay the debt! Seeing the man's great fear, sorrow, and humiliation, the King has compassion and summarily declares that he forgives the man his debt!

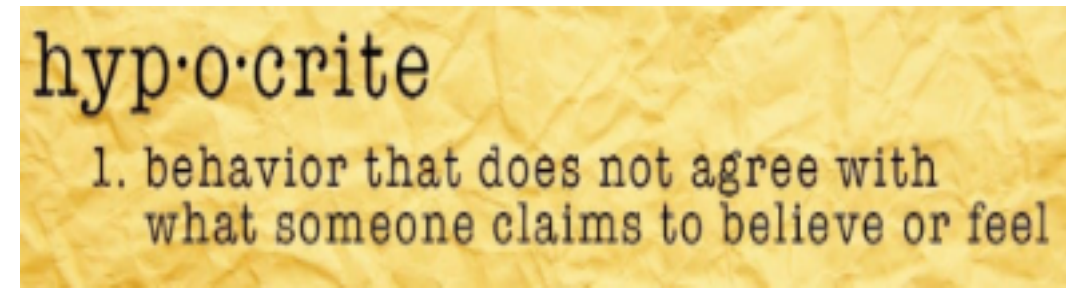




This was a very traumatic experience for the man, yet he is free of his great debt! Rather than celebrate, he seems to be enraged by his close call! Perhaps it offended his dignity. It is hard to say. People do the darndest things, especially those with narcissistic tendencies! His response is to go out and find someone who owes him a hundred denarii, a paltry, even laughable sum in comparison with the amount the king had forgiven him, and demand he pay it all back at once. The man says he cannot pay, and the king's servant goes into a rage and begins to actually choke him, demanding his money! The man falls to his knees and plead with the king's servant in the exact words the servant has used when pleading with the king! But his pleas fall on deaf ears and the king's servant presses official charges against the man demanding that the man be thrown into prison until he payed the small debt.

The other servants in the kings palace catch wind of this turn of events and are distressed by the injustice of it all. Finally someone goes to the king and informs him of what the man has done. The king is incensed! He calls the servant before him, gives him a hard dressing down – “*How could you not forgive this other man his debt when I forgave you your debt?! How could you do this foul deed?!*” The king goes back on his earlier decision to forgive the servant his debt, and since he can't pay, he has this wretched and cruel servant of his thrown into prison to be tortured until he pays all that he owes! Wow!

This is not a true story. It is a parable. A parable is a story in which the details are intended to convey a deeper meaning. Jesus came up with these parables all the time because they were an effective and memorable teaching tools. In this case, this story is not actually about a servant, and a king, and a debtor. It is about people who are self-absorbed, so much so that



they treat people without grace, without respect, with disdain, without any forgiveness in their hearts for the mistakes and transgression of others. Over the years, the church in general has been notorious for harboring these **traits** or **trends** in our people. We have a reputation for this personality type, when our reputation is supposed to have been just the opposite! The church is supposed to have been populated and run by changed people! We are supposed to have been kind and generous, people of good will, of empathy and compassion, who love people and show love to people – all people! Instead many of our number have garnered the reputation of having been ungracious and severe, suspicious and judgmental, nasty tongued, and terrible hypocrites!

The question Jesus asked His disciples then is the same question that He asks His disciples today. *“After I have forgiven you of all the things you have done to offend me; after I have cancelled all the unpayably large debt you owed me; after all the kindness and consideration I have shown you, how could you be anything less to the people around you in your life!”* You cannot be so self-absorbed that you are not aware of the craven hypocrisy of accepting these things from me and, in turn, withholding them from others! **[Ph’p 2:19-21]**